

Chapter 1: Hermione's Secret Project

Harry Potter was torn. Two nights ago, he had met his godfather, Sirius Black! He discovered the so-called dangerous, murdering, Death-Eater convict was not dangerous, had never murdered, fought against Death Eaters in the last war, and was never given a trial and so was never actually convicted of any crime. He was a genuinely cheerful fellow, or at least, as cheerful as an innocent person who spent 12 years in jail could be. The fact that he was still capable of laughter, and love, spoke wonders of his character. This was the man who could be his godfather! Harry was so excited, he could barely contain himself... if it weren't for the other events that happened that night.

The real criminal, Peter Pettigrew, had escaped. Without proof, Sirius was still a criminal, and Harry would never be able to live with him, walk down the streets with him, go shopping or play quidditch with him... and he blamed Snape. That slimy, greasy, git of a professor who could hold grudges across generations was the one who messed everything up and let Peter get away. Minister Cornelius Fudge wouldn't take his, nor Dumbledore's, word on the matter out of fear of a tarnished image from admitting a miscarriage of justice.

On top of that, his first decent Defense professor, Remus Lupin, was already packing up to leave. He, along with Sirius, were Harry's last living connections to his father and mother. He could have stayed at Hogwarts- never mind the rumoured curse on that particular teaching position- but now everyone knew about his... monthly fur problem. Once again, this loss was due to Snape and Fudge again. Snape, just because Remus was James Potter's friend, decided to complain to the ministry that he was a werewolf. Fudge, being the prejudiced minister that he was, immediately forced him out of the position, despite another two weeks of school term remaining. Sure, most of the students wouldn't be affected, as most exams were nearly finished, but there wouldn't be another full moon until summer break already started, and even during the school year, the full moons were never a problem anyways.

Harry could have had everything. Now he was back to square one. He felt a pang of hopelessness, sensing everything he gained kept being snatched from him. Sitting in the Gryffindor common room, half-moping, half-doing to himself, he didn't notice Ron approach.

"You alright, mate? You should cheer up! Did you hear? Sirius Black managed to get-"

"Ron?" Harry's head jerked up and whipped around. He forgot about telling Ron about what happened later that night. Hermione's time-turner was supposed to be a secret, as Dumbledore explained, but he did say it was alright to tell Ron. But then again, it was Hermione's secret, but she hadn't bothered to tell him just yet...

"-away, right from the dementors. I wonder how he did it? He was tied up in the room, wasn't he? But then again, he-"

"Ron!" Harry didn't want to explain everything right now. Yes, he had just gained a godfather, but he had lost him just as quickly.

"-escaped from Azkaban, so I guess it's not much of a surprise..." Ron was just rambling now. It seemed he had nobody to talk to about the events in the Shrieking Shack, and just decided to spill everything on Harry as soon as he got out of the infirmary.

"RON!" Harry stood up and grabbed Ron's shoulder, looking straight into Ron's eyes. "Look, Ron, I know a lot of stuff happened, but... I just don't want to talk about it right now. I need some time alone to think about all this, alright? I'll... uh... I'll talk to you when I'm ready. But not now. I... um... I just need to go for a walk alone. I'll see you at dinner?"

Harry stepped through the tunnel as the Fat Lady swung out of the way for him. He could hear Ron already talking to the next nearest Gryffindor about that night- with a few embellishment and omissions, of course. Taking the Marauder's Map out from his pocket and tapping it with his wand, he said the key words, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." The map revealed all of Hogwarts and the people inside. Briefly looking around to see what parts of the castle were devoid of dots, he realized how hard it really was to find some solace in the castle. In the late afternoon on a weekend, most of the kids had just returned from Hogsmeade and were wandering the halls or even using some of the empty classrooms to talk about their day. I guess I could always visit Myrtle, he thought. I'd technically be the only living soul in that bathroom...

Harry had made it to the doors just outside the second floor bathroom when he heard the moaning. "It's such a shame that Black character didn't get Harry... then he could have stayed here with me in the toilets..." He stopped. He definitely wasn't going to go in there.

Wandering down to the front doors, Harry couldn't avoid overhearing more and more conversations about Sirius, Professor Lupin, or Peter Pettigrew.

"...he got away! That guy's one sly bastard." Harry knew they were talking about Sirius, but that was exactly how he felt about Peter.

"...they're removing the dementors? About time. They weren't doing any good anyways. He snuck inside the castle twice, months ago!" Harry never thought about that. It was obvious Dementors were doing a far better job of attacking the students (and him in particular) than catching Sirius. Fudge must have been particularly stupid to keep them on the grounds.

"...shame that Peter Pettigrew and Potter won't get to see justice done." Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he heard that one.

"...packing up already? There's still two weeks to go! I have NEWTs next year! I need to learn all I can!" A Ravenclaw passing by reminded Harry of his Defense professor.

"...taking the dementors away? Black's still out there! We need proper protection!" Now who in Hogwarts could have been as dumb as the minister? Right, the Head Boy, Percy Weasley. Best to avoid him for the next little while.

"...werewolf! I can't believe Dumbledore let one in the school. We could have been mauled! This is outrageous!" Harry really needed to get away from everyone before he blew his top and began hexing everyone in sight. He wanted to tell everyone the truth: Remus was a good person, Sirius was innocent, Snape let his parents' betrayer get away. He couldn't, though, since it would just lead to more questions, and then everyone would find out about Hermione's time-turner and his role in Sirius' escape.

He made it out the front doors running, heading straight for the Whomping Willow. Everyone knew to avoid this tree and steered

clear of it. He slowed down as he approached it, and decided to sit a rock near the tree, but just outside its range. Whomp! The tree sensed his presence and quickly smacked the ground three feet in front of him. Harry smiled. This was the perfect resting spot. Thump! The tree tried again to hit him, this time with another branch, but its reach was even shorter. Whap! Again and again, the tree flailed in his direction, never quite reaching Harry. This is actually kind of relaxing, thought Harry. It almost has a kind of rhythm to it.

Thump

Crash

Bang

Crack

Donk

Harry waved his arms as if he were conducting a symphony. Leaning his head back, he stared at the clouds overhead. I might as well enjoy this as long as I can before I go back with the Dursleys, he thought. After half an hour, his tree-assisted drum solo ended with a head of bushy brown hair.

"Hermione?" Harry was still staring straight up, as his female best friend leaned over him.

"Hey, Harry. I heard from Ron that you weren't feeling very talkative."

Harry frowned. "It seems to me you're not telling Ron much, either."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Harry turned around to face Hermione. "The time-turner? He still doesn't know about that."

"Oh. Right." Hermione turned her eyes down, looking sheepish. "Well, I thought that I would wait until you told him about the whole rescue mission, first. I mean, I'm not supposed to talk about the time turner, being a Ministry secret and all... you only found out about it because we didn't have another choice."

"Is that why?" Harry started to chuckle to himself. "I was waiting for you to tell him about the time-turner first, because I knew I couldn't possibly explain it to him without bringing the whole mess about time travel into the story."

"So... I guess... we're just not going to tell him, then?" Hermione looked perplexed. Is this a secret they would have to keep from a friend? Out of convenience? She never had any good friends before Hogwarts, and Harry was the best friend she could ask for. Ron was... her other friend. No! she scolded herself. Don't think like that! Ron's a perfectly... adequate friend. With that thought, she scolded herself some more.

Harry, seeing conflicted feelings crossing Hermione's face every second, told her, "No, we'll tell him eventually. I mean, if we ever get to see Sirius again, then he'll let the cat out of the bag, won't he? I just don't feel like talking about it now. No... wait, that's not right. I guess I just don't feel like explaining everything now."

He looked at Hermione before continuing. "You know, you're the only one who I can talk about the whole incident openly. With Ron, I'll have to deal with the whole mess about going back in time without him... and you know how he'll feel left out that we travelled through time and didn't bring him along."

Hermione smiled. Yes, that was definitely Ron. She added, "There's also the fact that you gained a godfather and saved a hippogriff, while all he managed to do was get dragged into a hole by a big dog and then he lost his pet rat. Ron just has the worst luck sometimes..."

Harry bowled over in laughter at that point. "When you put it that way, Hermione, I don't think I'll ever want to explain everything to him." They both continued to chuckle quietly for a short while, until Harry frowned.

"Do you think we could have caught Pettigrew?"

"We would have seen ourselves, Harry. That would have messed things up."

"Well, we could have waited a sec and then searched the grass..."

"For a rat? Harry, you have to let it go. He ran away from us, and to catch up to him, we would have had to... well, run right past everyone."

Harry sighed. There was no arguing with Hermione- she always thought things through. "It just really annoys me, Hermione. If only we could have been hiding on the other side of the field..."

"We didn't have time to bring Buckbeak with us, Harry. And he's a bit big to hide... We could lay down flat on the grass, but then Buckbeak would have been sticking out like a sore thumb."

"What if we used the time-turner again? Then there would be three sets of us..."

"Harry, time-turners can't overlap their... time turning. The magic that's tied to the spatial folding within the device has to sustain it for..."

Harry's eyes were glazing over, much like Ron's were whenever Hermione attempted to get him to do more reading. "Err... Hermione, is there a simpler way of explaining that? It means no, right?"

Hermione scowled for a second before smiling again. "Yes. I mean no. Wait... I mean no, we can't turn back a second time. The earliest we could turn back to after that would have been the moment we turned the first time in the infirmary."

"I just wish there was some way to... I dunno, retry it a few more times until we get it right." Harry looked sullen, now.

Hermione perked up when Harry said it. "You know... I might be on to something with that... it's actually the reason why I came looking for you today, Harry."

"What?" Harry was shocked out of his mood, as his mind raced. "You mean we could catch Pettigrew? What do you have in mind? Why do you need me?"

"Harry... no, I can't catch Pettigrew with the idea I have. I can't go back in time that far, unfortunately. But I need you to take me to the Chamber of Secrets."

"Wait, what? You're doing your own time travel or something? What do you need the Chamber of Secrets for?"

"I'll explain when we get there." Hermione smiled, picking up her rather hefty book bag, which didn't seem to be filled with books this time. Harry got up with her, waving one last goodbye to the Whomping Willow, and they marched into the castle.

"Hello, Harry. I see you're still alive and well," Myrtle said sullenly.

"Um... yes... Myrtle... I just wanted to visit you... again," Harry managed to stammer out. "You look like you could use someone... to talk to..."

"OH!" Myrtle blushed. Well, it looked like a blush, as her cheeks turned whiter and slightly more opaque than the usual translucent grey. "Are you going to join me? Soon?" She batted her eyelashes.

Harry was speechless. He paled at the thought of "joining" Myrtle. "I...au...uggh..."

"That's a good start, Harry, but if you're going to die, I'd rather you be a ghost like me than an Inferius." Myrtle frowned. "If you can't fit in the drain pipes with me, how else could we sneak into the prefects' baths together?"

Harry's jaw dropped.

"Harry! What are you doing... oh, hello." Hermione peeked around Harry's shoulder. "Myrtle! What have you done to Harry?"

"Oh, so that's the way it is, Harry? I thought you came alone to be with me and instead there's another girl here with you? You just wanted to show her off to me, didn't you? Just reminding me that I'm not good enough for you? I hate you, Harry, I hate you!" Myrtle shrieked as she plunged into a nearby toilet, sending up a spray of water.

Getting splashed with toilet water managed to snap Harry out of his reverie. Turning to Hermione with a puzzled look on his face, he said "Did Myrtle seem a little more... emotional than usual?"

Hermione became a little flustered with that. "Umm... well, I was actually trying to see if I could find the entrance and unlock it without you this morning, but Myrtle was being a bother. I dropped a calming draught into her toilet... but it seems to have had the opposite effect. It should wear off soon, though."

Harry looked at her incredulously. A calming draught did that to Myrtle? And technically, she didn't even drink it, being a ghost and all. How does that even work?

"Harry... Harry! I need you to open up the chamber."

"Oh, right." Harry turned to the sink, whispering ~Open~ in Parseltongue.

They made their way down into the chamber, and Hermione stopped dead in her tracks. "Harry... That's the basilisk you fought last year?"

"Um... yeah." Harry was feeling somewhat embarrassed, although he knew there really wasn't anything to be embarrassed about. "I did have help, though. Fawkes pecked out its eyes for me, and..."

"Harry! That thing's huge! Basilisks are a rare beast already, and the biggest ones are usually only 30 or 40 feet long! This thing's twice that! It's probably older and bigger than any other basilisk in the world! Has Dumbledore seen this?"

"No... After I got Ginny out of the chamber, it closed up and I've never bothered opening it up again. You're the first one I've brought down here since last year."

"Really? Ooh, I feel so special, Harry." Hermione grinned mischievously. "Well, anyways, about my project." Hermione opened her book bag, and began removing dozens of small stone tablets, each with rune carvings on them, placing them in a neat pile. Next, she removed a textbook, and a huge stack of parchment, covered in notes and diagrams.

Project? thought Harry. Runes? That looks so complicated. I'm glad I didn't take that course...

"This is my OWL project for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy!" exclaimed Hermione happily.

"What? Wait, OWLs? Isn't that until fifth year, Hermione? What is this all about?" Harry stared incomprehensibly at Hermione.

"Well, you see, for both Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, you need to do a project for your OWL. Well, two projects, one for each class. I just asked the professors if I could combine the two into one big project..."

Harry nodded.

"...and since I was using a time-turner, I decided to do some extra research on time travel."

Harry nodded, but with a little apprehension creeping in.

"First, I looked up what made time turners work. Obviously, there's a lot of rune work carved into this device, not to mention powerful enchantments, and all that. But the main problem is that it's limited to only a few hours of time travel. I wanted to try for something... bigger."

Harry kept nodding, but at this point his head was just moving on its own while his brain was trying to figure out what Hermione was up to.

"So, I tried to figure out what limited the time-turner's total time travel. I figured it was due to two things. First was the fact that it brought your actual body back in time. Well, it seems pretty obvious if you've learned any Muggle physics, that the more mass you move, the more energy it takes, so moving a whole person back in time would be really difficult especially if you were travelling against the normal flow of time to do it. If there was something massless to send back in time, then... "

Up and down went Harry's head. He was almost completely lost now. He never got to learn any muggle physics, other than how much faster he was than Dudley's gang, because he was smaller. Did that count as physics?

"...the next reason is a little harder to explain. Moving backwards in time is... difficult to aim. In any case, if you've read anything about thermodynamics, apparently for any given present entropic state, the past contains multiple possible states of lower entropy..."

As Harry's head continued to bob up and down, his eyes glazed over.

"The end result of all that is if you attempt to go further back in time, you could end up in a whole other universe or something or even accidentally not manage to come back forward to the present... or at least, the correct present..."

Harry finally stopped moving completely, as his mouth hung open.

"...so that's why I need to use the Chamber of Secrets."

The familiar phrase managed to snap Harry back to reality. "Chamber of Secrets? Right! Why are we down here again?"

"Weren't you listening to me? I explained it all just now, Harry."

"I tried... but then you started talking about physics and all... and I couldn't keep up, Hermione."

"Physics? What part? Most of what I was talking about involved physics."

"Um... you were saying something about your body... and mass..."

Hermione gaped at him. "Harry! That was practically at the beginning! I was talking about that stuff..." she glanced at her watch. "Twenty minutes ago! You should have said something if you didn't understand!"

Harry shrunk back nervously. "Hermione... I just didn't want to interrupt you. You looked so excited to talk about all of this, and I didn't want you to stop... could you explain it again... a bit more simply?"

Hermione sighed. "Alright, Harry. Well, basically, a time-turner is limited to a few hours of travel mainly due to 2 factors: the fact that it brings your body back with it, and the fact that it has to 'navigate' the flow of time, backwards. Does that make sense?"

Harry nodded, with comprehension this time.

"So, to make it easier to go back in time, you have to change those. Fixing the first one's pretty simple- instead of sending the whole person back, just send their memories. Memories have no mass, so it's infinitely easier to move them around."

That made sense to Harry.

"The next issue, the 'navigation', is the bigger problem. If you think about it the muggle way, it's pretty obvious you need some kind of navigating ability because time is just another dimension like the three spatial dimensions, and I guess no wizard ever bothered to keep up with advancements in muggle science, especially not in the last hundred years or so..."

"Err... Hermione? You're going into a bit too much detail again..."

Hermione blushed. "Sorry, Harry. Well, anyways, the main problem is hard for a time traveller to 'aim' themselves properly towards the past. So, I figured, why not just use a second device that helps point them in the right direction? Or time, in this case."

This almost made sense to Harry. But if Hermione understood it that well, he'd trust she knew what she was doing.

"The solution is what my project is! I'm making a temporal beacon. This little device uses runes to emit a signal through space and time, so that when you use it with a paired device, it will always send you back to this particular time."

"This time? So that means that, no matter where... I mean, when you travel from, you always end up back here? I mean, now?"

"Well, yes, at least, the time when we activate the rune set. It's not quite as convenient as the time-turner, but this method lets you travel much, much greater lengths of time. Theoretically, at least. And I'm not too sure, but it might also allow for multiple trips, too, which is another weakness of time turners."

"I see now. But... how on Earth did you manage to get all this done in one year? You were already burning yourself out by taking all the classes! You even dropped Divination because of it!" Harry shook his head at his friend with a look of incredulity.

Hermione fidgeted, looking down nervously. "I may have... bought some extra time with the time turner. More than I needed for the extra classes..."

Harry was curious. Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "How much extra time?"

Hermione mumbled incoherently.

"What was that?"

"...an extra day for every day. Since I dropped divination."

Harry was floored. "Wow! Hermione, I'm shocked! You took out the maximum amount of time from the time turner? Since Easter? Why, you naughty rule-breaker, you!" He started laughing.

"Rule-breaker? Me? You're one to talk! Anyways, I just wanted some extra rest the day I dropped Divination, so I turned it a full day so I could get some extra sleep. But I didn't sleep the whole day, so I ended up spending the rest of it reading and working on my project... and I realized I might be able to get the first stage of it done by the end of the school year if I kept it up."

"So that's why we're down here? The first part of your project is complete? You still haven't explained why you need to be in the Chamber of Secrets."

"I was getting to that! Well, first, I needed a location that could be secret, and wouldn't be disturbed for a long time. It would have to sit undisturbed until my OWLs, when I have to actually hand in the papers for this project. On top of that, this beacon needs a lot of power. I mean, a LOT of power. I couldn't possibly charge it up using my own magic. Hogwarts, however, is built on top of multiple leylines, which are extremely powerful magical veins that cross the Earth. I figured that the Chamber of Secrets, being deep in the ground directly under the castle, would bring me really close to a leyline, and also let me keep this a secret."

Harry finally understood why they were hanging out in the dark, dank chamber with a giant (and surprisingly, not rotten) basilisk corpse. Hermione began to set up her runes, spreading her stack of parchments across the ground, constantly referring to them to place

the runes around the chamber while measuring precisely where each should go. It took several hours, and Harry knew they were missing dinner for this, but he was far too fascinated as he watched Hermione work. When she was finally done, she looked up at Harry.

"Harry, there's one more thing I want to ask of you." She was looking straight at Harry, with a very eager and hopeful look in her eyes.

Oh no. Hermione? Is she going to ask what I think she's going to ask? I mean, she is a girl... and the two of us are alone in the chamber together, and nobody else is going to interrupt us. Oh my god, I'm not ready for this... Harry's mind was reeling, as Hermione approached him slowly. Oh no, oh no, she's getting closer. Is she really going to do it? Is she going to ask me to kiss her? I mean, she's definitely a nice girl, and she's my best friend, not counting Ron... wait, no, even counting Ron she's still my best friend, but does that make it better, or worse?

"Um... Harry?" Hermione was right in front of him now, looking worried. She saw him tense up, but she didn't know why.

Harry's brain continued to work in overdrive. Am I too young for this? I'm thirteen... well, almost fourteen in another month or so, and Hermione's fourteen already, and I guess I've heard of people dating when they're fourteen, so I guess that's perfectly normal. But Hermione? She's like a sister to me, isn't she? Could I really kiss her? Heck, could I kiss anyone? I have no idea if I'm a good kisser or not... I can't believe my first kiss is going to be with Hermione. Wait...when did I already agree to this? She's like a sister, right? I have to say no... She's my best friend, after all. Well... suck it up, Mr. Potter. You're a Gryffindor, aren't you? Just give her a kiss. Heck, you almost gave a dementor a kiss a few nights ago, this can't possibly be much harder than that!

Hermione held Harry's hands. Her hands were trembling in nervousness as she bit her lower lip. Looking straight into Harry's eyes, she softly said, "Harry... I want you to do it with me."

Harry's brain went from moving faster than he could control and instantly ground to a dead stop.

"...d-d-do...do it? Do it with you?" He managed to mumble out. His brain started to move again, slowly. Do it with her? Does that mean

what I think it means? Isn't kissing supposed to come first? Maybe even some snogging? There's something wrong here. What's she asking for, again? I must have missed something...

"I want you to do the project with me," Hermione said, more firmly this time.

Project? What project? Oohhhhh... The gears in his brain began to put everything together. "Right... sure... but how can I be of any help? I don't know any Runes or Arithmancy."

"You don't have to. I've already researched and planned out what needs to be done, so don't worry. I just want you to be there with me. I don't want to be alone if it doesn't work... or heck, even if it does work. That might actually be worse."

"What do you mean? You're afraid when one of your projects will succeed?"

"Well, you know, if it doesn't work, I have no idea what will happen, but I'd feel more comfortable if you're there with me. And if it does work, I'll be sent back in time, but I don't want to be the only one who 's back, with nobody else to share my life with..." Hermione was quivering in fear at the prospect. Harry saw it, and hugged her.

Whispering into her hear, he said, "Well, of course I'll go back in time with you! I'll never leave you behind, Hermione... as long as you never leave me behind." He released the hug, looking into her eyes and smiled. "Besides, since we're doing this inside the Chamber of Secrets, I'll have to be here to let you in anyways, right?"

Hermione's eyes lit up and a huge smile grew across her face. Gleefully, she started skipping over to the runes on the ground. "Alright, then! I'm going to get everything charged up." She pointed her wand at one rune, muttered a few words, and the rune started glowing lightly. Moving to another rune, she repeated the procedure.

Once she activated all the runes, she sat back with Harry, watching the intricately patterned runes on the floor. "I've turned on the power-tapping runes now. They should be able to take power directly from the leylines to charge up the runes with even greater power."

"How do we know when it's ready?" asked Harry.

"Um... I'm not too sure myself. According to my calculations, once the runes are fully charged, they should somehow 'anchor' themselves to a certain point in time and then it'll become a proper temporal beacon, allowing us to 'find' that exact point in time from anywhere... I mean, anytime."

They watched the runes glow brighter and brighter. They were lighting up the entire chamber with their glow, and the light kept getting stronger. Hermione was watching as her excitement grew and grew- it appeared to be working as planned. Once the glow became unbearably bright, there was a huge flash, and the runes vanished instantly.

Harry and Hermione both fainted in the same instant.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- chapter's revised, nothing more than a few spelling fixes though.

Chapter 2: Contemplating Mortality

Harry woke up first with a dull headache. Looking around, he couldn't see anything at all, being enveloped in total darkness. Trying to resist the urge to panic, he searched his pockets for his wand, and muttered, "Lumos." The wand illuminated his surroundings, and he quickly remembered where he was. The Chamber of Secrets. Right... He was doing something down here, working on some project with Hermione...

Hermione! His eyes darted back and forth across the chamber in search of his friend. Whipping around, he finally saw her laying unconscious behind him. Rushing to her side, Harry knelt beside her, with one hand cradling her head and the other squeezing her hand. "Hermione! Are you alright? Hermione!"

He was getting desperate. He knew he couldn't lose her now. He had spent ages working with Hermione on this project, and he couldn't bear to see her die because of it. He knew they had shared their lives together, spending a good part of a decade at each other's side, keeping each other's secrets... Wait a minute, thought Harry. Where did that thought come from? I only met Hermione less than three years ago. Why does it feel like I've known her for so much longer? And... the project. He scrunched up his face, looking at the now-empty floor of the chamber. Well, it looks like it worked. The runes have anchored themselves into a specific moment in time... wait, how do I know what happened?

In his confusion, he started pacing around the Chamber. Ok, I've got to figure this out. What's happening to me? Oh, forget that, I have to take care of Hermione! She needs to go to the infirmary... He didn't have much time to think about it, however, as Hermione began to stir. Quickly running back to her, he conjured a glass and filled it with water. "Here you go, Hermione. How are you feeling?"

"Thanks, Harry." Taking the cup into her hands, she sipped the water, and immediately spat it into Harry's face. "Harry! Where did you get this water?"

Dripping wet with a thoroughly unamused look on his face, he replied, "I conjured it for you, Hermione. Jeez, did you think I scooped up some of that sewer water from the Chamber or something? Honestly."

"Um... sorry, Harry. That was the first thought that came to mind. I didn't know you learned the Aguamenti spell already."

Looking at her blankly, he began to say, "No, I haven't learned..." but then stopped himself. That was the spell he used. He had learned it ages ago... but when? Aguamenti was a conjuration, albeit one of the simplest ones. But they didn't even begin the simple conjuring spells in Transfiguration class until 4th or 5th year at least. Did Remus teach him that? No, he spent all the extra time mastering the Patronus spell... hm...

"What did you say, Harry?" Hermione looked up at him expectantly.

"I... err... I think I did learn the spell, but I don't remember when," Harry stated. That wasn't even half of it- he didn't just learn it, he had become so comfortable with the spell he performed it without thinking as he was running towards Hermione.

"Hm... that's odd. Well, thanks, anyways. I'm just glad I'm not drinking sewer water." Hermione grinned as she took another sip, clearly swallowing it. "Where'd you find this cup, anyways? It's really nice."

"I... I think I may have conjured that one as well."

"WHAT? Harry, this is a solid conjuration! This has got to be sixth year material!" Hermione held up the glass to her face, studying it while slowly turning it in her hands. "It's not just a simple glass, either. It's really nicely detailed. You've got the base a bit thicker so it balances really well, and there's these ridges around the sides so it's really easy to grip... When did you learn this?"

"I don't remember! Wait, no, I do remember... I think..." Harry strained as he tried to recall when exactly he got his lessons in conjuration, when an image struck him. "Err... Hermione... I think you taught me."

"What? I didn't..." Hermione looked up at Harry as she seemed to remember the same memory that Harry had. She giggled as she remembered Harry's first attempt at conjuration, a simple glass sphere, which ended up being slightly more oblong and squishy than

a glass sphere had any right to be. "Oh, wait... I guess I did help you with it... back in sixth year."

Both Harry and Hermione paused, stunned at her words. Back in sixth year? They were both even more stunned when they realized that was the truth.

Staring at each other, both of them said at the same time, "We need to talk about this."

Looking around the dark chamber, which was still only being lit by Harry's wand, he stood up and held his hand out to Hermione. "Well, let's not do it here. This isn't exactly the most comfortable place to have some headache-inducing discussions."

Grabbing her hand and helping herself up, she said, "You're right, Harry. Do you have a place in mind?"

"I don't know. Let's just get out of here first, though."

When they stepped into Myrtle's bathroom, their stomachs rumbled. He looked over to Hermione, who was avoiding his gaze and looking to the floor with embarrassment. Grinning, he grabbed her hand and led her out of the bathroom. "Well, that settles it. We'll talk about this in the kitchens. Come on."

On their way to the basement, Harry noticed the halls were empty and dark. It was clearly past curfew. How long were they out? He muttered with his wand "Tempus". 12:30. Just after midnight. They should have finished their project well after dinner, but before curfew... around 9:00 or so. They must have been out for a few hours. Another thought struck him. What if they were unconscious for more than a day? Quickly, he said "Calendata". June 19th, 1994. It was still Sunday of the Hogsmeade weekend. Harry let out a long breath in relief. They were only unconscious for a few hours. Hopefully nobody would miss them, other than their dorm mates, since it was still a weekend.

Hermione watched Harry verify the date and time. "You know, you could just combine the two with the Calentempa spell. That'll show you the date and time."

Harry looked at her and asked, "Is this another piece of that future knowledge you have?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled. "Nope, this is one I actually learned back in first year. It helps keep me organized, you know."

Harry chuckled. Of course, he thought. Typical Hermione.

When they arrived at the fruity painting in the cellars, Harry tickled the pear and made his way into the kitchens. Hermione asked, "How did you know to do that?"

Harry replied, "Freaky future knowledge." Hermione nodded, as that seemed to be a perfectly acceptable answer for their actions in the past half hour.

"Dobby! We're feeling kind of hungry, would you mind getting us some food?" With a pop, the crazy house-elf appeared in front of Harry and saluted.

"Yes, Dobby is seeing Master Harry is not being at dinner! Dobby is getting food for Master Harry and friend Herm-nee!" With another pop, he disappeared again.

"Master Harry? When did this happen?" Hermione looked at Harry inquisitively.

"Err... I don't know, honestly. I think it was probably when I freed him from Malfoy last year... but I didn't know that he made me his master."

"Harry, you've got to free him! This is slave labour, you know. Those elves work tirelessly every day and people don't even bother acknowledging them." Hermione was getting rather worked up. This was clearly something she was passionate about.

"Don't try that Spew campaign again, Hermione! You found out why they need to have masters, after all!" Harry retorted. "Besides, you know I'll treat Dobby with all the dignity and respect he deserves for all his hard work."

"Spew? What do you mean, Spew?" Hermione was taken aback, but clearly remembered something along those lines.

"S.P.E.W. You know, where you tried to free the house elves, but then they ended up refusing to clean Gryffindor tower afterwards? You tried that... next year." Harry trailed off as the conversation drifted into confusing waters once again.

"Oh, right. S.P.E.W. Well, why not? It was..." Hermione fell silent quickly as the memories came back to her. The house-elf bond, she thought. I forgot about that... they do need masters to stay alive.

Their silence was short-lived, however, as Dobby and a dozen other Hogwarts House Elves came running up to them with plates of salad, mashed potatoes, grilled chicken, ribs, pasta, and other goodies, as well as pitchers of pumpkin juice. Their hunger overrode their argument as they quickly loaded up food onto their plates and began to eat. After a few minutes, Harry spoke up first. "You know, Hermione... mm... seeing as how confusing all this is... nom nom... I think we should start at the beginning."

"Harry! Swallow your food before you talk!" scolded Hermione. "Honestly! You're as bad as Ron!"

Gulping down the mashed potatoes in his mouth, Harry grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I think it's the first time I've had as much of an appetite as him, though."

Hermione smiled as she speared another piece of chicken with her fork. "Well, let's start then. You remember the glowing runes in the chamber, right?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, they were getting brighter and brighter. I was standing right beside you."

Hermione continued, "I remember that pretty clearly too. Then there was a flash..."

Harry interrupted, "...and that knocked us out, didn't it? It looked like it was going so well, and I thought the runework was perfectly fine..."

Hermione tilted her head and stared at him. "You were sure? You haven't even taken runes yet... oh wait, this must be the future stuff again."

"Well, at least we know it worked. I'm pretty sure we sent back memories from the future, and that's how we know all this stuff."

"I agree. At least we know the project is a success... although I didn't anticipate it being so confusing."

Finishing up their meal, they thanked all the house elves, who bowed to them profusely. Dobby was nearly letting his nose hit the floor. Waving goodbye, they stepped back out to the hall.

"We should talk about this tomorrow, Harry. Let's just sleep on it tonight, and we'll talk about it at breakfast, alright?"

Harry agreed with her. They were already pretty tired, and it was getting late. It was a shame he had left his invisibility cloak in his trunk, but at least he still had the Marauder's Map with him. Opening it up and speaking the password, they made sure Filch was at the opposite end of the castle before quickly making their way up to Gryffindor tower. Thankfully, everyone else was in bed already, as they quietly bade each other goodbye in the common room and made their way up to their respective beds.

Both of them dreamed dreams of the future. An international competition, where Harry was forced to participate. The return of Voldemort, at the hands of Peter Pettigrew. Cedric was dead. Was he really? He remembered Cedric standing in the second-place position on the podium, clapping as Harry held a trophy. Voldemort holding the trophy? How was that possible? Another new teacher who seemed to be hell-bent on hunting down muggle-borns. Hermione wasn't safe! Sirius! Sirius was dead! Wait, no... he wasn't dead, he was at home, punishing Kreacher for lying. Where was his home again? There were Horcruxes! Dumbledore dying... and Snape killing him. Or was Dumbledore alive, and Snape dying? What was all of this?

Harry got out of bed early, as soon as the first rays of sunlight entered through the windows. He couldn't sleep. While his dreams weren't exactly nightmares, he needed to really sit and think about them. No, not dreams, thought Harry. Memories. He walked down to the common room and sat on the couch in front of the fireplace. I wish I could discuss this with Hermione, thought Harry.

As if his wish was granted, Hermione was quietly creeping down the stairs in her pyjamas. Seeing Harry, she picked up her pace, quickly rushing down the steps and joining him on the couch. "Couldn't sleep?" she asked.

"No, but the memories are getting clearer," he replied.

"Same with me. Do you remember when we went back in time from?"

Harry scrunched up his face in thought. "Hm... I think it was in fifth year, but it seems a bit confusing. I'm getting conflicting memories for some reason."

Hermione spoke slowly next. "Um, Harry... do you remember going back in time just before our OWLs?"

Harry looked at Hermione, more confused than ever. "What? No, that can't be right, Hermione. I definitely remember sixth year. I found an interesting potions textbook... and you helped teach me conjuration! That was definitely sixth year, you remembered that one, too!"

Hermione nodded. "But you remember fifth year too, right? I wanted to do a final test to see if the beacon was really working... so we made the Time travel runes to send our memories back. And it worked, don't you remember?"

Harry sorted through his memories again. Fifth year... fifth year... I remember a big pink toad not teaching anything... right! Hermione's project came up again!

"Yeah... I do remember going back now. But how does that explain how I remember sixth year happening?"

"Before you ask that... let me ask you... what electives did you take in fourth year?"

"Care of Magical Creatures and Divination, of course. Those are the ones I'm taking this year, and it's not as if I could just pick up something like Ancient Runes when I'm already a year behind..." Harry paused. Didn't he? This was odd. He had definitely learned Ancient Runes. Hermione helped him work through the third-year

material and he caught up with the fourth years. He was in class with Hermione! But he also remembered being in Divination with Ron. And how could he possibly forget Hagrid's Blast-Ended skrewts? "Hermione... I remember taking Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination. I don't suppose I got a time turner like you did this year, did I?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think that's what happened, Harry. I think... we went back in time more than once."

Harry's eyes bulged out of their sockets at the revelation. "Really? That definitely explains all the weird conflicting memories I have, for one..."

"Like what?" Hermione asked cautiously.

"Like... well, Voldemort gets resurrected at the end of the tournament next year..."

"The Triwizard Tournament?"

"Yeah... that's the one. But Cedric was killed in the process..." Harry's voice cracked as the painful memory made his heart jump.

"I'm sorry, Harry..." Hermione reached around Harry's back, soothing him. "I didn't mean to bring up such a bad memory for you."

"No, it's alright. In fact, I think it's better than alright... because I also remember pushing him out of the way and grabbing the cup by myself, and he was still alive when I got back."

"He's not the only one who died, though, is he?" asked Hermione, already knowing the answer.

"No... you remember it too, didn't you? Professor Dumbledore was murdered at the end of sixth year... I think that was a pretty big reason for us to travel back in time. Without him, the war against Voldemort would be... tough, to say the least. " Harry growled in frustration. "Ugh! I didn't think that helping you with your Runes OWL would lead to such a frustrating life, you know."

Hermione hugged Harry and buried her head in his shoulders. "I'm so sorry, Harry! I didn't mean to do this to you..."

Harry hugged her back, and quietly spoke into her ear. "I didn't mean it like that, Hermione. This thing you made seems to let us have second chances! Not many people get to have do-overs with their lives, right? I mean, if I ever get these memories sorted and figure out what to do with them, I think it's quite a blessing."

Hermione lifted her head from Harry's shoulders. "Really? You mean that?"

Smiling, Harry told her, "Yes. Your idea's brilliant! I honestly can't say it enough, but you're the most brilliant witch of our age. No, wait... you're the most brilliant witch ever. I'm pretty sure nobody else has ever figured out how to travel years backwards in time."

"Thanks, Harry." Hermione's eyelids were drooping, as she shifted to a more comfortable position on the couch. "I'll get this all figured out. I think I just need another nap before breakfast. We can talk about this all day."

"Yeah, that sounds good." Harry lowered his head against the armrest. A quick tempus told him it was still 7:00 AM. They could sleep for another two hours and still be in time for breakfast.

Ron woke up to an empty dorm. It was just past 9:30. Breakfast was being served, and he wasn't in the Great Hall? He quickly got up and went over to Harry's bed to wake him, but it was empty. What? He's already gone down to breakfast and he didn't wake me up? Sunday breakfast during a Hogsmeade weekend were Ron's favourite, and quite possibly the only reason he would ever wake up before noon on a weekend. The chocolate chip waffles are probably almost gone by now! I've got to get down there, fast!

Quickly swapping his pyjamas for the nearest t-shirt and pair of pants he could grab, he rushed out the door and thundered down the stairs. He was quickly stopped before he got to the bottom by his brothers, Fred and George. "Hey!" shouted Ron. "What's the big idea?"

"Quiet, dear Ronniekins," began one of the twins.

"This is a momentous occasion here."

"You'd better sit still and enjoy."

"Unless you've got a masterful prank planned..."

"...which we doubt, but miracles do happen..."

"...but don't you dare ruin our betting pool."

"Pranks? Betting? What are you two talking about?" asked Ron.

"Keep it down, Ron! We can't wake them up now..."

"...so have a gander yourself while they're still napping, yeah?"

His view was blocked by a crowd of Gryffindors who were all encircling the couch in front of the fireplace. Most of them were girls, whispering to each other and giggling, especially Parvati and Lavender. A very hushed murmur was going through the entire group. Pushing his way through, he could see a mop of messy black hair on the side of the couch. Is that Harry? He turned to Neville and asked him, "Is that Harry? Why's he sleeping down here?"

Neville looked at him and replied, "Oh... uh... maybe you should take a closer look... but before you do, I have to ask you something."

"Huh? What do you want to know?"

"Did you see Harry come up to bed last night?"

"Uh... no, I didn't," Ron answered. He must have come back to the tower really late... good thing he had the map handy. "He must have been doing something late last night, sneaking around the castle or something."

"Ohhh, so Harry didn't come up to bed, either?" Lavender cut in. "Well, I think that confirms it." She turned to Parvati, giggling like mad. Whispering to the group of girls behind her, most of them suddenly squealed in delight... except for one Ginny Weasley, who looked shocked, and quickly bolted towards the girls' dorm stairs.

Why do those girls keep giggling so much? Ron took another step closer, and saw a large, bushy mass of brown hair snuggled right in Harry's lap.

"WHAT?" Ron couldn't help but shout at the top of his lungs at the sight. Of course, given where he was standing, he was practically yelling that into Harry's ear. That caused him to jerk awake flailing his limbs, throwing Hermione off his lap. Hermione, of course, did very nearly the same thing, and the two of them tumbled off the couch in a messy pile.

The questions descended on them before they even knew what was going on. Ron was swept aside in the wave of gossipmongers.

"So, Harry, how long has this been going on?"

"Hermione! Tell us everything! Is Harry a good kisser?"

"How late were the two of you up last night?"

"Where were you two doing it? I didn't- I mean, nobody saw you at the Astronomy tower."

"Couldn't you two have hooked up next year? Bollocks, I was only a few months off... never figured the two of you would have moved so quickly."

Harry realized he was being gawked at by about half of Gryffindor tower at that moment. To his left were dozens of girls from second, third, and fourth year, and a few older ones as well. The looks on their faces ranged from delight to disappointment, and most of them seemed to be very talkative. On his right were Seamus, Dean, and Neville, his dorm-mates; the Weasley twins, grinning maniacally as usual; Ron, looking stunned; and Colin Creevy, clicking away at his camera.

"Colin! What are you doing? Why are you taking pictures of me?"

"Actually, Harry, he's not taking pictures of you... well, not only you," George answered for Colin, as the little boy scrambled away to avoid Harry's wrath.

Hermione, who had been completely silent up to this point, let out a small "eep." She was blushing furiously. Harry turned to face her when he heard the squeak. Looking back at George, he asked, "You haven't answered my question. Why are you taking pictures of us?"

"Well, that's obvious," answered Fred.

"We need evidence."

"Records."

"Proof."

"We can't have people disputing the fact that the two of you are together, can we?"

"WHAT?" Harry and Hermione managed to shout in unison. "What makes you think that we're together?" asked Harry. Hermione managed to keep quiet, her eyes darting from the people, to the couch, to Harry, to Colin's camera, back to Harry...

"Well, Harry. You and Hermione were both up late last night, weren't you?" asked George.

"Err... yes..."

"And you were together, weren't you? Where were you to spending such a lovely evening?" asked Fred.

Harry looked at Hermione. He couldn't possibly tell everyone here about the Chamber. And he was such a horrible liar, especially under pressure like this. He replied with the only thing he can think of. "Um... we can't tell you."

"Perfectly understandable, Harry. There's no reason to share all the fine details with us. But do tell, how did the two of you end up on the couch here?" Back to George again. How did they keep coordinating things like this?

"We didn't sleep together here!"

"It sure looked like sleeping to us, Harry. You looked pretty comfortable there. We're pretty sure you just got up from an episode of sleep, not fainting."

"Unless you got really comfortable with Hermione here and she was nice enough to you to make you faint." The twins looked at each

other, then back to Harry and Hermione, wiggling their eyebrows. "Anything you'd care to share,

"Huh?" Harry didn't quite catch that last one. People were staring at him with a keen interest. Oh nuts, thought Harry. This is even worse than the whole Heir of Slytherin thing last year. I've got to get out of here. Harry got up quickly, pulling Hermione up with him. "Let's go, Hermione. We should get away from everyone... let's go to Hogsmeade, alright?"

Hermione didn't have time to protest as Harry pulled her through the passageway out of Gryffindor Tower.

"Well, I think that settles it."

"It certainly does, my dear brother."

"Two dates in as many days."

"Not to mention a night on the couch, too. I didn't even think that would happen until the third date, at least."

"Well, you know Harry. He's a man of action, isn't he?"

"Certainly is. Never a dull year with Harry around."

"Let's go down to the Great Hall and make our announcement. Most of the school should be at breakfast by now."

The Gryffindor common room quickly emptied, save for Ron, who was still slumped on a couch, looking completely shocked. He had completely forgotten about the last chocolate waffles of the year.

"Hear ye, Hear ye!" Fred and George stood at the front of the Great hall. One of them was ringing a bell, while the other was holding a large piece of parchment, much like a scroll. "The results of the Harry Potter's Precious Person Pool have been compiled. Drumroll, please."

The bell was quickly transfigured into a drum set, and George (or was it Fred?) began drumming.

"For bets on 'June of Third Year', which pays out at four to one odds- congratulations to Susan Bones, Penelope Clearwater, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, and Alex Stebbings. Next, for bets on 'June of Third Year with Hermione Granger', which pays out at ten to one odds- congratulations to Madam Pomfrey and Luna Lovegood! Winners, please contact us this evening to collect your winnings."

Rolling up the scroll of parchment and putting away the drum set, the twins marched out of the Great Hall. As soon as they were out the doors, pandemonium ensued at three of the four tables.

Harry and Hermione used the secret passage into Honeydukes, since he still didn't have a permission slip to enter Hogsmeade. Most of the students didn't remember that small detail, however, so they only had to be careful not to be spotted by staff members. Having missed breakfast, the two of them quickly made their way to Three Broomsticks, where Harry ordered a full English breakfast, while Hermione had two eggies in the basket.

"You know, everyone thinks we're a couple, now." Hermione was glancing back and forth between her breakfast and Harry.

"Yeah, that much is obvious," said Harry, stirring his hash browns with his fork. "We can't let that rumour spread, right?"

"No, we can't. Can you imagine? You're the Boy-Who-Lived! Going out with a plain muggleborn girl... the press would have a field day with you..." Hermione seemed to have lost her appetite, and wasn't touching the remaining pieces of toast on her plate.

"What? You're thinking that's the problem? Hermione, we have to stop them just because it's not the truth! I wouldn't mind if you were my girlfriend, but you aren't, right? You're just my best friend." Harry replied. He thought he saw Hermione's expression brighten for a split second, but she was quickly looking down at her plate again.

"...Right. Of course. We're just friends. This whole situation is one big misunderstanding." Hermione straightened up and looked at Harry. Taking a deep breath and exhaling, calming her nerves, she seemed to want to say something else, but held off. They finished their breakfast in silence, after which Harry paid and they left the inn to walk around town.

They spent the rest of the day discussing what they could remember of the future. It was difficult, but the most poignant memories were also the most emotionally intense ones. They both concluded that the first time they went back, Voldemort had returned at the end of Harry's fourth year, at the end of the tournament. At the end of fifth year, Hermione decided to test out her beacon once and for all and go back in time. That started the next two trips, but they were unsure of which one was which. In one, Professor Snape suddenly dropped dead at the staff table at the end of sixth year, and Dumbledore died just before the train ride home. In another, Professor Dumbledore died earlier, killed by Professor Snape. All three, however, featured Voldemort returning in fourth year. He couldn't quite remember how it happened each time, but it did have something to do with a trophy cup.

As Hermione helped Harry piece together the answers, she seemed to grow more and more distracted by her thoughts. Harry tried to cheer her up by buying her some sweets at Honeydukes, but quickly remembered that she was raised by dentists, and didn't have much of a sweet tooth. Zonko's was definitely not her thing, but they finally settled on browsing the bookstore for a few hours. Not wanting to dine at the same restaurant twice in one day, they inadvertently wandered into Madam Puddifoot's tea shop, but left as quickly as they could. Eventually, they managed to find Cleavican's Fine Meats, the local butcher who also sold sandwiches, and bought some simple smoked meat sandwiches for lunch.

Throughout the day, they had to avoid as many familiar faces as possible, since Harry forgot to bring his invisibility cloak with him in his haste to get out of Gryffindor Tower. Every time Hermione saw a staff member, she and Harry had to quickly duck into an alleyway to hide. When it was nearing dinnertime, they felt they had avoided their classmates long enough that, at the very least, they wouldn't fuel any more rumours. They made their way back to Honeydukes, and took the secret passage back to the castle.

As they sat down for dinner, the twins flanked them on either side. "Well, Harry, Hermione. The two of you have made us a lot of money today. We'd like to thank you."

Harry was completely flummoxed. "What are you talking about? What did we do?"

"Well, you see, many people were unsatisfied with your performance on the couch this morning," said George, sitting to Harry's left.

"Then again, we can't speak for Hermione, and she's really the only one that counts, eh, Harry?"

Fred, on Hermione's right, winked at him. Hermione scowled at him.

"Even photographic evidence wasn't enough for a few of them." At this, both Harry and Hermione glared down the table at Colin Creevy, who spilled his pumpkin juice.

"But nobody could deny your second date with Hermione."

Both of them looked at each other, and then at the twins sitting beside them, speechless. Hermione recovered first. "...Date? What date? Wait, what do you mean by second date?"

"We couldn't imagine a more perfect day for a young couple."

"Yes, with breakfast at Three Broomsticks, jaunts to every which shop around Hogsmeade..."

"...including a notable visit to Madam Puddingfoot's..."

"...followed by a picnic lunch..."

"Don't forget the snogging."

"Oh, of course. The most important part of any date. The secretive, back-alley snogging sessions."

Both Harry and Hermione blushed furiously at this. "We weren't snogging!" Harry declared. "We didn't even have anything at Madam Puddingfoot's!"

Hermione continued for him. "And we weren't snogging in the alleys! In case you forgot, Harry isn't allowed in Hogsmeade!" she continued in an angry, but hushed, whisper. "Look, Harry and I aren't a couple, right, Harry?"

"No... we're just friends," he confirmed. "Is everyone going to be bothering us about this tonight?"

The twins looked at each other. "Well, the betting pool did involve nearly two hundred people in total... I think they'd be expecting some answers. The others might just be curious, though."

"Betting pool? What's this all about?" asked Hermione.

"Who and when Harry's first love would be."

"You were taking bets on Harry's love life? I can't believe the nerve of you two!" screeched Hermione. "What would the professors say?"

"Well... Professor McGonagall said 'Five Galleons on December, Fourth Year.'"

Hermione didn't know if she should feel defeated, or angrier. Grabbing Harry, she quickly said, "We're not going to deal with this mess. Look, we're not a couple, all bets are off, and we're leaving." The two of them quickly left, quickly heading for the second floor bathroom.

Hermione was still pacing back and forth, muttering to herself, half an hour after leaving dinner. Harry decided to interrupt her by asking, "Hermione? Can you tell me what was bothering you today?"

She stopped pacing and stared at him. "Isn't it obvious? The twins, and that stupid pool they had on your love life!"

"No, I meant earlier in the day, back in Hogsmeade. When we started to figure out what was going on with the future." He gestured to Hermione to sit down beside him. "Well, in all three cases, it seems like Voldemort's returning. I don't think we can stop that. Is that what got you down?"

"What? No, it's not V-Vo-Voldemort. I'm not too worried about him... not at the moment, anyways."

"What? Really? You've got bigger things to worry about than Voldemort?" Harry was amazed. Was there anything scarier out there than Voldemort being resurrected and returning to power? Asking a girl out on a date, maybe.

"Yes... sort of. Tell me, Harry, have you ever heard of the Anthropic Principle?"

Harry didn't bother replying, instead only frown slightly with a questioning look on his face.

"Oh, right. Of course not. Well, basically, what it says is that for the universe to be observed, there has to be something there to observe it. And it works the other way around, too. The observer has to be able to exist in that particular universe to observe it."

"That sounds kind of... obvious. And circular. How is that scarier than Voldemort?"

"I'm getting to that! Um, next question... do you remember how V-Voldemort was doing right before we jumped back each time?"

"From what I remember, he was gaining power. Things weren't looking good. That's probably why we went back in time, right?"

"Yes, I think so too. Which brings me to my next point. Why did we stop?"

"Stop? What do you mean?"

"Well, when we activated the beacon, all our past trips flooded our memories all at once, right? We managed to figure out that we took three trips backwards in time."

"Right."

"So, that means... This time around, it's our last trip, isn't it? We're not going back again, or else we would have the memory of it."

"No, we might be... wait, no, that wouldn't make sense. If it all comes back at once... huh, you're right. That's why you asked me about that principle-thingy right?"

"Anthropic Principle. And the worst part is, I don't remember us getting any closer to defeating Voldemort on all our trips back. I don't think we'll have any kind of major advantage this time around, either." Hermione was shaking as she said this, and nearly crying.

"What are you saying, Hermione?" Harry could sense her fear, and it made him feel afraid as well.

"I'm saying that... we're experiencing this as our... our last trip... because I don't think... we might not... survive to go back again," she answered quietly. Crying, she hugged Harry, and he held her. Neither one could think of an alternative explanation.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- Chapter revised. I've made a few minor changes here to possibly help vague-ify things. I might need to revise again as the story develops, but there's nothing major that will change in the plot.

Chapter 3: Reliable Data Transmission

Hermione was still looking quite morose at breakfast on Monday. Harry sat down beside her, and gave her a nudge. "Cheer up, Hermione. I've been giving it some thought... there might be other reasons why we only went with three trips back."

She turned to look at Harry, her shoulders still slumped over as she picked at her food. "What could it be? I mean, I can't remember everything clearly, but one thing that stood out was..." she glanced around, lowering her voice to a whisper, "...horcruxes. We never found them all, did we?"

Harry shook his head. "No, we didn't... and there were several more to be found when we sent ourselves back."

"So we definitely don't have the information we need to defeat Voldemort this time around... and why wouldn't we go back and try again if we could gain even a small advantage each time around?"

"No, that's definitely something we would do... hm..."

"And even if we did manage to defeat Voldemort through an amazing amount of dumb luck, I doubt we'd come out of it without casualties, would we? I know you, Harry. If you could, you'd keep trying and trying again until you somehow managed to save everyone."

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. "You're right, Hermione. You know me really well, don't you? Well, maybe we can look into..."

At that point, Ron had apparently woken up, gotten changed hastily, and sat down beside Harry. He began scarfing down breakfast at his usual, inhumanly fast pace. After clearing his first plate, he only slowed down just enough to make a few noises as he was eating. "Wa wur oodoo doo eshuray?"

Hermione ignored him, which was really quite amazing given the mess he was making as he attempted to talk. Harry was the one who scolded him this time, "Ron! Swallow your bloody food before you talk, will you?"

Ron stopped eating momentarily in surprise. Swallowing the food in his mouth, he asked, "Isn't it Hermione who usually tells me to do that?"

Harry replied, "That's not the point, Ron. It really is disgusting when you talk with food in your mouth. I just said it faster today. What were you saying before?"

Ron was taken aback by Harry's blunt statement, but he repeated, "What were you two doing yesterday? I didn't see you guys at all after you left the common room. You have any idea what people are saying about you two?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then back to Ron. Given the twins' antics yesterday, they were pretty sure people were talking about their supposed "relationship." They had flat-out denied it, right? But did that make things better, or worse? Silly rumours never let details like facts get in the way. How bad could it be, though? So they hung out together, but they've been doing that for the past three years. The only difference this time was that Ron wasn't there with them... was that all it took to make the difference between "hanging out" and "dating?"

Harry ventured the question first. "Er... we didn't spend much time inside the castle yesterday, Ron. What are they saying about us?"

"Well, I'm not going to believe the crazier rumours, of course. I heard that you got Hermione pregnant or something-"

"Pregnant?" Hermione managed to repeat that one word, but was otherwise speechless.

"I said I didn't believe them! Lavender said something about you looking sick this morning, but I don't know anything about that. Did you manage to catch a cold or something yesterday? You should see Madam Pomfrey about it, I mean, a potion will fix that right away, won't it?"

Hermione couldn't believe what Ron was saying. Then again, she could believe that Ron was saying it. Evidently, Molly had never given him The Talk, but then again, whoever Ron had heard the rumours from probably knew a little too much about all the wrong things. Morning sickness? The supposed "date" was only yesterday!

What on earth were they thinking? In fact, the thought of teenage pregnancy scared Hermione. She knew that, at least in the muggle world, teen pregnancy often meant dropping out of school... the very thought of that made her want to throw up a little. No, wait, definitely don't want to do that this morning... deep breaths, calm down. Definitely act Not Pregnant... Oh dear Merlin, how's Harry taking this?

Harry, evidently, had never been given The Talk, either. He was looking back and forth between Ron and Hermione in confusion. Ron was still continuing to ramble. "So the twins told me that you two never showed up for breakfast or lunch at the castle, and that you were together the whole day. Why didn't you tell me you were dating?"

Harry held up his hand. "Ron, stop. We're not dating. We just spent the day talking about... stuff."

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?" Ron asked inquisitively. "C'mon, Harry. I'm your best mate. You can tell me."

Harry turned to Hermione with a pleading look in his eyes. He knew this was something they couldn't share with Ron... and evidently, their future selves didn't bother sharing it, either. He didn't want to lie to him outright. He simply couldn't do that to a friend. Hermione noticed his discomfort with the situation and came to his rescue with a single word. "Runes."

"What? Runes?"

Harry caught on quickly. "Ancient Runes, Ron. I, uh, was thinking about dropping Divination next year and taking Ancient Runes with Hermione instead. We were talking about Runes all day, and she was giving me her notes, so that maybe I wouldn't be too far behind next year." Technically that wasn't a lie, as he definitely needed to swap over to runes next year so that he might be able to lend a hand with Hermione's project.

Ron was flabbergasted at the announcement. "Are you serious, mate? That's one of the hardest courses! You want to swap over to Ancient Runes, when you're already a year behind? You're barmy!"

"Yes, Ron, I'm serious," answered Harry through gritted teeth.

Ron continued ranting, oblivious to Harry's displeasure. "But on top of that, you're dropping Divination? It's the easiest course! It's almost like a free OWL! You'd have to be absolutely nutters to drop Divination and take Runes! Honestly, what kind of a fool would do that?"

Harry dropped his face into his palms. Ron had done it again. There was somebody sitting right beside them who had dropped Divination just a few months ago... not to mention the fact that Harry had just admitted he was completely serious about taking Runes in its place. Harry may have been able to forgive Ron for his careless yammering, but Hermione...

"A fool, am I?" Hermione glared at Ron. "So I'm completely nutters, am I? You're lucky exams are already over, Ron, because I swear it's going to take months before I even think about helping you with your homework again. Maybe if you keep up with your Divination course you could actually predict what going to come out of your mouth before you open it!"

With that outburst, she got up and left the table. Harry quickly followed, shaking his head in disappointment at Ron and muttering, "Maybe it would have been better if you just kept eating instead of talking, Ron." He left Ron at the table, who was looking around, still wondering what he had done wrong.

Just outside Professor Flitwick's classroom, they ran into Draco Malfoy and the pair of walking lumps of meat. Harry groaned inwardly. He didn't want to deal with this. Here it comes, he thought.

"So, Potty, you decided to snag yourself the mudblood, huh? Goodness knows a proper witch would never give you the time of day," he sneered.

"Oh, shut it, Malfoy, or else she'll punch you again." Harry snickered at the memory. That was one he could always count on for a patronus.

Malfoy kept his haughty tone, and narrowed his eyes at Hermione. "That just proves you're worthless as a witch, mudblood, fighting like a muggle. You haven't got the guts to face me in a proper duel."

Harry looked at Hermione, who really did look like she was about to punch Draco again. Harry replied, "If you don't remember, Malfoy, it was you who backed out of the duel you challenged me to back in first year. Are you ever going to go through with it, or are you just going to keep running away?"

That statement struck a nerve. Draco raised his wand at Harry to hex him, but Harry instinctively threw off a Silencio, Petrificus Totalus, and Incarcerous in single, chained motion. Malfoy wasn't able to speak his first spell off before he was silenced, and quickly fell down to the ground, stiff as a board and bound in ropes. It was at that moment that their Charms professor walked onto the scene. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for raising your wand against another student, Mr. Potter. Now would you care to explain what happened?"

Harry froze. Looking at the diminutive professor, he put his wand back into his pocket and was about to apologize, but Hermione interrupted. "He was defending me, professor. Malfoy called me a... mudblood. Twice. He was trying to pick a fight, as usual."

"Is that so? Well, twenty points from Slytherin then, for use of foul language. I won't have such... intolerant... words being uttered in my classroom." Professor Flitwick frowned openly at Draco, showing that his partially-goblin heritage revealed itself quite prominently in his teeth as much as his stature. Draco paled when he saw the display. Turning to Harry, his attitude lightening considerably, he said, "That was excellent spellwork there, Mr. Potter. I'd ask you to do it again if I didn't have to take points away from you. Where did you learn to duel like that? It certainly couldn't have been from that travesty of a duelling club from last year, could it?"

"Er... no, Professor. I'm not sure, really. It was just a reflex," Harry answered, fidgeting nervously.

"Is that so? Well, it certainly reminds me of my younger days, when I was a professional dueller. With reflexes like that, I wonder how you'd do with proper training in duelling." The professor smiled. "Well, enough with the chatter. Time to begin our class! Come on, everyone, into the classroom!"

It wasn't until everyone had filed through the door, walking past Draco, who was still bound and frozen stiff on the ground, that Professor Flitwick dispelled the jinxes from him.

Charms class consisted a review of Cheering charms as well as a few others. Harry decided to practice with Hermione, thinking she really needed the cheering up. Ron had caught up to them after the incident with Malfoy was over, but Hermione was ignoring him. His charms were only mildly successful as he practiced with Neville, and was barely any better at it than his much-ridiculed partner was.

Hermione was much more cheerful at lunch. Alright, Harry admitted he had been rather sneaky about it, casting two cheering charms in quick succession at Hermione and then cancelling only one. It would wear off eventually. He just didn't want her to be so sullen all day, worrying about impending doom because of some odd philosophical observation. He did want to talk about the time-travelling more, but was trying to avoid turning towards the grim thoughts that Hermione was having. Thankfully, her (temporarily) brighter attitude helped the conversation open up with a lighter topic.

"So, do you remember how you learned to duel like that, Harry?" Hermione asked. "I mean, obviously, it was a part of the future memories, wasn't it? But even if you remember learning the spells, you still need to practice them to cast them so well, don't you?"

Harry scratched his head. "I don't know, really. I honestly can't dig up the memory of when I actually learned those spells. But I wasn't thinking of a particular spell when I did it. It was more like a reflex."

"You certainly cast those spells quickly! Your wand didn't even stop moving between the spells! You had to have practiced it."

"I think I did practice it, Hermione. I got this feeling, when I saw Malfoy draw his wand, that I'd been there before. Well, since I've lived through the future three times already, I guess I had been there before. But it was still a rather vague feeling, like... I don't know... déjà vu, I guess. I think I've been through a lot of duels in the future, and I opened up with that spell combination for most of them."

"I get the same feeling when I'm reading my notes. It's like some of them are more important than others, and that I have to do

something with the information, but I just can't seem to recall exactly what it is I have to do..."

A thought struck Harry. "Hermione... what if this is the best that the beacon can do?"

Hermione turned to him. "What do you mean, Harry?"

"I mean, what if... all these vague feelings and fuzzy images of the future are all that we can manage to send back? I mean, my spellcasting has improved a little bit, and we have a very rough idea of what's going to happen in the next few years... but what if that's all we get? Then there's no point in sending ourselves back over and over again if we're never able to use the information."

Hermione looked at him for a while before speaking, and smiled slightly. "Yes... that does make sense. Oh, I'm so relieved..." At this point, Harry wondered if the Cheering charm had finally faded, as her expression quickly turned to a frown. "Darn! I was hoping it would be so much more useful than that! I thought I was going to revolutionize time travel..."

Harry kept his face blank as he grabbed Hermione's shoulders. "Hermione, listen to yourself. You're disappointed that you haven't managed to revolutionize time travel while you're in third year?" He started laughing. "You've already done the amazing, and you've pretty much proved to me that time travel is technically possible, going years back! Maybe we can improve on your ideas in the future, but I think it's safe to say you've already done something more amazing than any other third-year has done... or will ever do, in fact."

With a huge smile on his face, he hugged her tightly, whispering into her ear, "You're the most brilliant witch of our times, Hermione. Never doubt that. You'll always amaze me."

Hermione left lunch that day with a genuine smile, no cheering charms needed.

The two of them would, however, need cheering charms to get through the afternoon without losing their tempers. Professor Snape strode into class, his cloak billowing behind him. "Today, class, we will be brewing the Scouring Potion. I dare say that some of you," he

said, looking straight at Neville, "...could possibly end up with a cauldron even dirtier than a proper scouring potion could clean."

"Hey, where were you at lunch?" Ron whispered to him.

"Um... looking at Hermione's Runes notes," Harry answered.

"Potter! Brewing a potion does not require you to open your mouth," Professor Snape snapped. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

The rest of potions class continued as usual, but Professor Snape seemed to be especially vindictive today. Harry figured he was still seething at Sirius's escape, and despite not having any evidence, blamed Harry for it. Then again, whether he was responsible or not, Snape probably would have taken his frustration out on him anyways. He managed to lose another 50 points by the end of class, and despite brewing a potion that was only a slight shade lighter than it was supposed to be at the final step, Snape declared it "worthless" and vanished his work before he could complete it.

Harry glared at Snape when he did that, and the moment their eyes locked, Harry felt a presence in his mind. There was something pushing, searching... NO! he thought forcefully. He must be searching my mind... he's done this before... I know it... Harry vaguely recalled sitting across from Snape, losing all his precious thoughts to the bitter man. I have to protect myself... shields... mental shields...

Harry, again, reflexively put up a mental shield, blocking the force that was poking into his head. Snape was taken aback slightly, but continued to stare at him. Harry was unable to break his gaze, and felt a more directed force in his head. Sirius... how did Sirius escape... The words edged inwards, prodding his barriers. Thoughts of Sirius and Buckbeak began to rise to the forefront of his mind, but Harry quickly quashed them down. He wasn't going to give an inch. He was determined to leave Snape empty-handed. He finally managed to break eye contact with Professor Snape, who stumbled back a step.

"Potter! You insolent little boy, I'll have you..." began Professor Snape, enraged.

"Do what, Professor? You're going to try to expel me? For being attacked by you? Don't bother sending me to the Headmaster, Snape. I'm going there already." Harry gathered his brewing equipment, packing quickly, and strode out the door. As soon as he was in the hallway, he ran straight for Dumbledore's office. He could hear a shout of "Detention, Potter!" echo from the dungeons.

When he got to the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office, he realized he didn't know the password. "Um... Lemon drop? Sugar quill? Honeydukes chocolate? Bernie Bott's Every Flavour Beans? Bernie Bott's Earwax Flavour Beans?"

"For future reference, Mr. Potter, I do prefer my password to be sweets that I enjoy." Professor Dumbledore was standing right behind him. "The password for today is Cockroach Cluster. Now, please, step into my office. Is there something you'd like to discuss?"

As they walked into Dumbledore's office, he sat behind his desk while Harry took a seat in front of him. Fawkes trilled in greeting.

"Hello, Fawkes!" Harry waved to the phoenix. The sight of the majestic bird always managed to lift his spirits. Turning to Dumbledore, he began recalling what had just happened in Potions. "Potions class was... well, it was pretty standard for what Snape teaches."

"Professor Snape, Harry. Do continue."

"Sorry. Well, just after Professor Snape vanished my potion, he looked at me straight in the eyes. I suddenly felt that I couldn't look away, and felt something in my mind, trying to grab at my memories. I think he was searching for something about Sirius. I managed to break away before he could get anything. That's when I left the classroom and decided to come to you. He may have given me detention for it, too, but I didn't stick around long enough to hear it."

A look of astonishment managed to cross Dumbledore's face for a second before returning to his kind, grandfatherly expression. "You're saying you felt Professor Snape probe your mind? And you managed to fend him off?"

"Yes, sir." Harry was growing agitated. Didn't Dumbledore care about what Snape had done to him? This had to be against the rules... if there were rules about this, at least. Harry wasn't sure about that. "It certainly felt like he was invading my privacy," he said with a scowl.

Dumbledore straightened up. "Harry, rest assured that what Professor Snape did to you was most certainly not proper conduct for a professor of Hogwarts. I will have words with him about this. I have one request, however."

"What is it, professor?"

"I would like to test your mental shields. Please trust that I will not take anything from you that you do not wish to give me. I only want to see the strength of your defences."

Harry thought for a moment. Professor Dumbledore can do that too? Well, at least he's more trustworthy than the greasy git. "Very well, Headmaster," he said as he looked straight into Dumbledore's eyes. He immediately felt some tendrils sweeping around his mental barriers, much more gentle than the prodding he felt from Snape. He felt more and more pressure from them, however, but just before he felt his shields crack, the tendrils retreated.

"Very interesting, Mr. Potter. Where did you learn to do this?" Professor Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling merrily.

"I'm not sure, sir. I didn't know I could do that until Professor Snape invaded my mind this afternoon."

Professor Snape burst into the room at that moment, his face red with anger. "Albus, that boy is not to be trusted! He is keeping secrets- dark secrets. He couldn't have learned Occlumency on his own! He must have helped that convict Black escape!"

Occlumency? thought Harry. The word triggered a flood of emotions and images in his head, but he kept silent.

Professor Dumbledore stood up to face Professor Snape. "Severus, you will calm down this instant. Harry Potter has not wronged you in any way. If you do not learn to let go of your old grudges, Severus, they will only haunt you for the rest of your life." Turning to Harry, he

said, "You may go, and your detention has been cancelled. I will need to have some private discussions with Professor Snape."

Harry Potter left the office, confident that he had actually won a battle against Snape, for once.

Harry caught up to Hermione, who was making her way back to Gryffindor Tower. She was still making a point of ignoring Ron, and made a beeline for Harry when she saw him. "Harry! What did you do? What did Professor Snape do?"

Harry grabbed her wrist, quickly whispering "I'll tell you all about it, in the chamber." Hermione's eyes widened, and she quickly followed.

As soon as they passed through the chamber's doors, Harry quickly turned to Hermione and asked her, "Do you remember Occlumency?"

Hermione was startled by the question. "Occlumency? No... wait, yes! I do remember doing Occlumency! What does this have to do with... oh, Harry! Is that what Professor Snape was doing to you this afternoon? He was attempting to enter your mind?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, but thankfully, he doesn't know about this. He was pretty surprised that I had any shields at all. He was looking for things about Sirius's escape. I think he wants to prove I had something to do with it and get me expelled."

Hermione gaped at him. "That's what he wanted? He can't! I mean, even Dumbledore knows Sirius is innocent! He can't do that to you!"

Harry grinned. "I know. When I told Dumbledore, he cancelled my detention and I think he was about to reprimand Snape when I left the office. But that's not the point... I think we should keep practicing Occlumency, just in case. This is a really powerful device, and we can't let the wrong people find out about it."

"You're right, Harry. I think we should take up practicing it every day. It'll help us organize our thoughts as well... maybe we can figure out more details about the future with it. When should we start?"

Harry grinned. "No time like the present. Nobody's going to disturb our meditations down here, and we still have a few hours before dinner."

After two hours of practice, they had made enormous strides in creating their mental barriers. It seemed that, at least for one cycle, they had been practicing it every day, and they had their minds fairly organized and shielded. However, Harry noticed a discrepancy within his own mind.

"Hermione? Do you notice anything... odd about your memories? Especially a few of the future ones?"

"Funny you should mention that, Harry. Are you talking about the ones that seem to have their own built-in shields? I think I came across a few of those myself."

"This is odd... I'm going to open one up and see what it is..." Harry concentrated for a minute, trying to peel away at the encapsulated memory. It was definitely a shield he had created himself, as it felt almost identical to the shield he had made for his own mind. After half an hour of intense concentration, he broke through and recalled the memory as clearly as he could. He gasped at what he was now remembering- runes. They were several specific runes, but half a dozen complex rune phrases, and their appropriate carvings. He could see them clearly. It was as if he had spent weeks committing every detail of these particular runes to his memory. "Hermione? Do you have some parchment and a quill? I think I need to write this down."

"Err... Me too, Harry. I just opened up one of my own memory-capsules. I need to write this down, too." Hermione scrambled for her book-bag, pulling out two quills and a stack of blank parchment. Both of them began writing and drawing furiously. Between them, they ended up with lots of rune phrases involving the runes of Memory, Time, Return, Landmark, and Identity. They looked up at each other, and back to the runes. Hermione quickly scrambled back to her book-bag, and pulled out the original notes she used for her beacon. "Harry... I think I know what this is."

"I think I know too, Hermione... but do explain it to me in case I'm missing something."

"I think... this is an improved version of the beacon. We sent ourselves memories of an improvement on the beacon. Look, my original didn't bother with the Setzis, the rune of Identity. I think these ones will be keyed to our magical signatures. On top of that, there's an entire second layer over everything I did before- there's Arlantz, rune of sequence, linked with Koteib and Teantso, runes of progression and counting. There's also Lomelke, rune of Dominance, bound tightly with Lakehns, rune of Clarity, but I'm not sure what that set really does. The whole rune phrase is ordered above the Memory runes in the beacon."

Harry nodded, and then grinned wildly. "Hermione! Do you know what this means?"

Hermione looked at him with a puzzled expression, obviously still trying to figure out the runes drawn in front of her. "No, I just said I didn't, Harry. This is going to take me a while..."

"No, no, no... I mean about time-travel!" Harry was very nearly jumping for joy. "This is why we didn't remember anything beyond three futures ahead! We sent back memories to build a newer, better beacon! And since it seems like nearly all the additions are focused on the memory runes of the beacon, I think we figured out a way to send back memories better and clearer. That's what the Lakehns is for, right? Maybe we won't be stuck with confusing, fuzzy, déjà-vu-like memories each time!"

Hermione eyes shone with an excitement that Harry was familiar with- she always looked like that when she realized there was plenty of research to be done, and she knew exactly where to discover the information. "Harry, that's brilliant! We have to finish this as fast as possible! And we have to unlock all of the memories we stored in our little Occlumency capsules!"

Harry was taken aback by Hermione's sudden enthusiasm. "Huh? Why? This is exciting and all, Hermione, but what's the rush?"

"Oh, don't you see, Harry? We figured this out in one of our futures, right? So why didn't we just build the improved beacon then, instead of sending the instructions back in time to build it now?"

"Err... wait, why didn't we just do that?"

"Time, Harry! It's a precious resource, you know. You remember, in the time we got to the end of sixth year, Dumbledore was dead, and Voldemort was gaining power every time! We need to build this as early as we can so that we can have as much time to prepare... even if we have to go back a few more times after that, the earlier we are, the bigger advantage we'll have."

Harry nodded in agreement. "Right... let's work on unlocking these every night... I want to make sure we have all the important, packaged memories, just in case one of them is some kind of warning not to do something. We can make a plan after we've got them all."

They spent every evening, before and after dinner, unlocking all the encapsulated memories as they could. It took them a few days to get everything. It only had some of the most important information. Aside from the partial temporal beacon upgrades, he had sent himself information on the known Horcruxes (A ring that would injure Dumbledore; Slytherin's locket, which was fake; the diary, which was already destroyed; Ravenclaw's Diadem and Hufflepuff's cup), and the prophecy. Hermione had sent herself information on where to find the Room of Requirement, as well as the rune setup required to actually send a person's memories back. Hermione was excited with this information, as she said it was the "harder" part of her project, and she had expected to keep working on it until her Runes OWL project was ready to hand in.

Both of them had sent themselves back memories of how to actually encapsulate memories in their own Occlumency barriers. Apparently, it was the only way they could figure out how to ensure a memory would be retained clearly. There was a very limited amount of memory that could be sent back with this method, so they only stuck to the most pertinent information- and dedicating entire rune sets, with arithmanced measurements and layouts, to memory severely limited the other information.

While they received the memories of the improvements to the temporal beacon, it took them (mostly Hermione, actually) several more days to understand its new functions. The Clarity runes, linked to every Memory rune, were obviously there to make sure the memories arrived in the past distinctly. The Experience, Control, and Dominance runes had an interesting function- they ensured that the last memory to arrive would be the "dominant" memory, so they

would arrive in the past remembering what they have done, instead of feeling like they had a bunch of images from the future shoved into their heads. On top of that, the Sequence, Order, and Counting runes tied to the Dominance memory also allowed them to fully experience each "trip", in order, instead of receiving an overwhelming flood of every single trip through at once. The last modification had little to do with the runes themselves, and everything to do with what they were carved on. Hermione had, in one final, tiny encapsulated memory, reminded herself that her original runes were carved in soft sandstone, the standard stone used in Ancient Runes class. To make a much stronger, more powerful, and durable rune, they were to use marble. And there was plenty of marble within the chamber of secrets itself. The weaker material was the real reason they only dared to go as far as three years ahead before returning.

With their plans all laid out in front of them, tools at the ready, and only five days before the Hogwarts Express arrived to take them home, Harry and Hermione set their plans in motion.

Chapter 4: One and a Half Train Rides

Carving the runes was quite simple, once they figured out how to do it. The advantage of marble over sandstone was also the main problem. It was incredibly difficult to carve, but the carvings would be able to channel several orders of magnitude more magical energy than a sandstone rune would. The basic runic carving kit that Hermione had purchased was only good for making the barest scratches on marble, damaging the tools more than the stones. Then she realized why she had locked the memory of Room of Requirement, and the procedure to open it, away so tightly in her mind. It would be the key to their success. The room provided a large, fully furnished, professional warder and enchanter's workshop. They were the two main industries in the wizarding world that used runes on a daily basis. Warders often worked on large stones, etching deep, powerful runes that would protect large properties. Enchanters, however, carved small, delicate runes for permanent enchantments in small objects, such as brooms. Hermione had use for both sets of tools, apparently.

The next four nights involved much use of the invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map. They waited until after curfew each night, levitating large, heavy slabs of marble from the depths of the Chamber and running all the way up to the seventh floor to the Room of Requirement, often taking detours to avoid Filch, Mrs. Norris, professors, and prefects that were patrolling the halls. After that, they spent a few hours each night carving the runes into the slabs. They decided to sleep in the room itself, partly because they didn't want to risk an extra trip through five floors of the school, and partly because they were too tired each night. Setting an alarm early in the morning just before sunrise, they got up just before sunrise to transport the completed slabs back down to the chamber. There were almost no patrols at all that early in the day, so the trips back were much easier. Finally, they would sneak back into Gryffindor Tower and crawl into their beds for an extra hour or of sleep.

On the night they carved the final runes, they decided to forego sleep to activate the new beacon as soon as possible. They laid everything out, checking every rune, every rune phrase, and every cluster to make sure they were carved and placed correctly. Satisfied, they activated the runes, and a dull, pulsing glow began to emanate from the runes. It was charging up much more slowly than the original one, so they decided to sit down against a wall and rest.

The rhythmic glowing from the runes in front of them was very calming, and they soon fell asleep beside each other.

Several hours later, with the runes fully charged, they flashed brightly and disappeared. During the course of their nap, they had shifted from their sitting positions. Harry had tipped over in his sleep and ended up using Hermione's lap as a pillow, while Hermione's head was drooping down over his, only a centimetre away from bumping into each other. Harry reacted to the flash of light first, waking up with a start and jerking his head up. This, unfortunately, caused him to smack his mouth straight against Hermione's, rather painfully. Harry rolled away, clutching his mouth while Hermione jerked up, quickly coming to full alertness. They looked at each other, realizing what happened. In a flash, there was a ten-foot gap between them.

Oh, flaming Morgana's underpants, what the hell just happened? Hermione swore in her mind. That hurts! She touched her lips, which were still feeling sore. Did Harry just kiss me? Was that my first kiss? Does it even count as a first kiss? My god, that hurt! She glared angrily at Harry. That has got to be the worst first kiss in history! I mean, Harry's certainly brave... and noble... and the best friend I've ever had... but OW THAT HURTS. Is my lip bleeding? Touching the inside of her lip, she realized that that yes, in fact, she was bleeding slightly. Her glare turned to an outright blazing flame that burned from her eyes straight into Harry's. He shrunk back, looking extremely fearful. No, Hermione continued. I refuse to accept that. That doesn't count. It wasn't a kiss at all. He'd better give me a proper one to make up for it... Hermione's heart fluttered at the image of a proper, tender, passionate, and real first kiss from Harry. Wait, what am I thinking? Kissing Harry? Oh no, stop, stop, stop! She turned bright red in embarrassment.

Harry, on the other hand, was completely confused. I hope I didn't bump into Hermione too hard, he thought. I'd better check to see if she's hurt. Just as he was about to make a move towards her, however, she glared at him. Oh god, she's mad at me. I DID hurt her! I need to apologize to her... and quickly... but she seems so angry right now... well, I'd better do it before she gets angrier. Firming up his resolve, he was just about to open his mouth, when Hermione touched her lip, noticing blood. Her glare intensified tenfold, and Harry suddenly lost all his nerve again. He backed away and huddled behind his own knees, only daring to take quick peeks

at Hermione. She's bleeding! I really did hurt her! I can't believe I was so stupid. She looks like she's about to kill me! Maybe I can grovel in front of her and she'll make it quick... All of a sudden, Hermione's face was flush with embarrassment and she seemed to be avoiding Harry's gaze. What just happened? Why's she avoiding me now? Damn girls are always so confusing...

He cautiously crept up to Hermione, and in the most sincere voice he could manage, said "I'm sorry I bumped into you, Hermione. Are you hurt?"

Hermione appeared to take several calming breaths before answering. "Yes, I'm fine, Harry." She then muttered quietly to herself, "Oh good... he said 'bumped'... he doesn't consider it a kiss, either."

Unfortunately for her, she didn't say it quietly enough. Harry managed to catch the last few words... Kiss? I thought I just hit her mouth... with my own... oh god, does that qualify for a kiss? Harry gaped. I've never kissed anyone before... wait, has Hermione? I doubt it.

"Err... Hermione... was... was that your... um... first kiss?" Harry asked meekly.

"NO!" she shouted vehemently. "No no no no no no no. That wasn't a kiss! That doesn't count. You didn't kiss me, Harry. That was not my first kiss. Definitely not. It was just a bump."

Harry quickly backed down again. "Alright Hermione. That... was just a bump. Right."

They stared at each other in silence, unsure of what to say next. Turning to where the marble slabs used to be, he said, "So... I guess the new beacon works now, doesn't it? Why didn't we get a flood of memories like last time?"

Hermione, eager to change the subject, quickly explained. "The clusters we added make sure we actually get to experience each trip through time, and remember them in the right order. I didn't realize that would be a problem with the original design. It'll make things much easier to remember and organize, too."

Harry nodded in understanding. "I guess that makes more sense. I just hoped there would be an easier way to check to see if it was working properly or not."

Hermione replied. "Well, we can always create the 'return' cluster with the leftover sandstone I have in my bag... it won't do very long distance travel, but we could just carve them up in a few hours and come back. My future self was nice enough to pack the memory of it so that it came through clearly." She smiled. "Well, let's make sure we know what time it is, so that we know we came back to the right beacon. Calentempa." The date and time floated in front of her. 1994, June 30th, 8:51 AM.

Hermione's eyes bugged out. "Harry! We have to be on the carriages to Hogsmeade in less than an hour, or else we'll miss the train! Have you packed yet?"

"No I haven't, Hermione! I've been with you every night, remember? We haven't had time to pack!"

Rushing out of the chamber and back into Gryffindor Tower, Harry began to open up his dresser and stuffed everything he had into his trunk. The room was nearly empty, as everyone else was probably in the Great Hall eating breakfast already. Oddly, he noticed that Ron was still asleep, and hadn't bothered to pack last night. He shook Ron to wake him.

"Whuzzat? Gerroff, that's not chocolate..." he muttered, still asleep and presumably dreaming.

"Ron! Wake up! Haven't you packed yet?" Harry shouted at his friend.

Ron opened his eyes lazily. "Huh? Harry? There's still time, you know... no rush..."

"Ron, it's past nine o'clock. We have to be on the carriages by nine-thirty, or else we'll miss the train. Everyone else is already gone."

"Won't take too long..." Ron said, rolling over in his bed.

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. "Alright, Ron, whatever you say. But I'm not saving any breakfast for you if you're late." Ron slowly

started to get up, stretching and yawning lazily. Since his friend was acting mostly awake, Harry went back to his trunk to begin stuffing all the clothes, textbooks, and school supplies into it haphazardly. He did take care to place the Maruader's Map and invisibility cloak carefully, however. He was finished in fifteen minutes, and levitated the trunk out of the room downstairs. It took Hermione five minutes to catch up to him. She grinned at him as they stepped out of the portrait-hole. "Let's catch up to Ron downstairs, Harry."

Harry chuckled. "He'll have to catch up to us, actually. I had to wake him up when I got upstairs. Last I checked, he was still packing."

Hermione let out a very unladylike snort. "Ugh, I should have guessed. Well, I'm not waiting for him. We still have a few minutes left to grab a quick bite from the Great Hall. Let's go."

Harry and Hermione just rounded the corner to the carriages when they both stopped. Standing before them were no longer the horseless carriages they remembered, but ones that were being pulled by dark, winged horses. They looked thin, almost skeletal, and at the same time not quite solid- they seemed to shimmer and shift as if they were only a little more than frozen smoke. "Hermione, are you seeing what's in front of the carriages?" whispered Harry.

Hermione nodded, but also took note that Neville didn't seem to see anything odd at all. "I don't think anyone else can see them, though. Maybe we should just keep quiet about it for now. I'll look them up next time I can go to the library."

Getting on the carriage with Neville when they spotted Ron, dragging his old trunk behind him as fast as he could. Hermione was watching with an amused look on her face. "Shame he doesn't remember his first year charms," she said quietly.

"Hey guys!" huffed Ron, breathing heavily. "Why... didn't you wait... for me?"

"We didn't want to be late for the train, Ron." Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

"And we did need to get a bite to eat before we left," Harry added.

"I did wake you," Neville said. "You waved me off, saying you'd be ready in time, so I left."

Harry looked at Neville. "Really? You tried to wake him too? He was still asleep when I got back to the room to pack my trunk."

All three of them turned to glare at Ron, who shuffled in his seat uncomfortably. He quietly muttered, "Well... you guys could have helped me with the trunk, at least..."

Hermione replied dryly, "Don't tell me you've forgotten how to cast Wingardium Leviosa already, Ron."

Ron looked sheepish, but declined to comment. When it was clear he had nothing more to say, Neville spoke up. "Where were you this morning, Harry? I thought you packed early because you were already out of bed, but you weren't at breakfast with everyone else this morning."

Harry gasped quietly when he realized what he almost let slip. Looking at Hermione, he decided to go with what had become his standard excuse. "I was getting some last minute notes on Runes from Hermione. I probably won't see her again for a month, and she's been helping me catch up with third year runes so I can switch over to the course next year."

Neville was amazed. "Wow, that's impressive, Harry. I have to admit, Runes is pretty useful, even though it's such a tough course that I'd never take it myself. What course are you dropping?"

Ron answered for Harry. "Divination. I still think he's barmy for doing that. You can practically guarantee yourself an A on the OWL just by making things up. Why would you throw away such an easy chance at an OWL, I don't know."

"Passing all your tests isn't the point of school, Ron!" Harry and Neville were rather surprised that it was Hermione who said that.

"Oh yeah? I never thought I'd hear that coming from you, Miss Know-It-All!" Ron shouted back.

"Ron, don't you dare talk like that to Hermione! She's your friend!" Harry rushed to Hermione's defense. "Yeah, she gets good grades,

but more importantly, all the things she knows are actually useful!" He said that with a knowing smile, looking at Hermione.

The carriages had arrived at the Hogsmeade station, and they made their way onto the train in silence. They made their way into a cabin, whereupon Hermione immediately began removing some blank sandstones from her trunk, as well as a few notes and carving tools. Neville looked interested at the sight, while Ron just goggled. "We should get started right away, Harry. This should take us a few hours, and the train ride should be the perfect amount of time for us to finish it."

Ron looked at Harry, and said, "Wait, you're serious, mate? You're actually doing runes?"

Harry looked at Ron in disbelief. "Err... yeah, Ron. I've told you a dozen times this past week."

"But... don't you see how crazy that is? I've been trying to convince you not to! You'll fail the course!"

Harry felt that this was the last straw. "Convince me? You just called me barmy every time I told you. That's your idea of convincing me not to take the course? Look, if you can't accept the fact that I'll be taking Runes, don't ask again, because I'm not changing my answer. Hermione and I will be practicing the entire train trip back, because it's the last time she can help me before summer vacation."

Ron turned to Harry, then Hermione, then back again. Shaking his head and muttering, he left the cabin. Neville, who had backed away from the trio during the spat, spoke up. "You guys don't mind if I stay, do you?"

Hermione gave him a warm smile, saying, "Of course not, Neville. I mean, we won't be very talkative, but we certainly don't mind if you watch."

They settled down into their seats, and Hermione began instructing Harry on how to use the tools and carve the runes. She got set, carving all the most intricate runes while Harry took the simplest ones, which were mostly made up of straight lines. Neville watched with rapt attention, but he was too shy to interrupt their work. About three hours later, just past the midway point in the train ride, they

were finally done. Seeing that they were finished, Neville finally spoke up. "So... could you tell me what all this stuff means? It looks awfully confusing."

Harry thought for a moment. "Um... it is pretty confusing, actually. But I'm sorry, Neville. If it doesn't work, we can't explain it to you. If it does work... well, we won't be able to explain it to you."

Picking up one set of runes, which were arranged and merged into one large cluster, he held it against his chest. Hermione did the same. Both of them brought out their wands, holding them against the cluster of runes, and murmured the activation sequence. The runes glowed as Harry and Hermione forced more and more magic into their runes, until it ended with a sudden flash.

Harry suddenly found himself laying down instead of sitting, and jerked his head upwards in disorientation. His mouth smacked into Hermione's. Hermione woke immediately, once again clutching her mouth.

Sweet Morgana, did he have to do that to me again? thought Hermione, as she looked at her fingers. Yep, my lip's bleeding again. The nerve of him! Couldn't he just wake me up properly?

Oh nuts to Merlin, not again, Harry was thinking. I have got to stop myself from doing that... is her lip bleeding again? I hope she'll forgive me... I really think I'll need to grovel this time.

"That one still doesn't count!" blurted Hermione.

"Uh... it's okay, Hermione. I don't count that one, either," Harry answered awkwardly.

"Good!" she huffed in reply. Wait, why am I so mad about this? It didn't mean anything to either of us... I think...

She's still mad... this isn't good. Maybe she was expecting something from me? pondered Harry. Did she actually want me to kiss her? Is that why she's so angry, since I seem to keep delivering such bad kisses? Wait, they don't count as kisses, she said so herself... ugh, I'll never understand her!

"So... you remember the last time then? When we... uh... did... what we just did..." Harry was far too embarrassed to say it clearly.

"Of course I remember! Why wouldn't I remember you doing that to... Oh!" Hermione's eyes lit up in realization. "Calentempa!" The time-and-date spell showed 1994, June 30th, 8:43 AM. "Yes!" She jumped up and down in glee. It worked! The beacon worked! And we remember our past experiences too! It's working exactly how it's supposed to! Oh, this is so amazing, Harry!" She leapt towards him and gave him a bone-crushing hug.

"Er... Hermione... you're forgetting something..." Harry wheezed out.

"What? Oh, of course. The new design was also supposed to increase the range output of the beacon, wasn't it? Well, we can't really test that unless we wait for another few years, but..." Hermione began one of her information-spilling rants.

"No, Hermione... I mean, this still means we have less than an hour to pack, eat breakfast, and head down to the carriages."

Hermione's looked at him for only a second before dashing straight for the entrance of the chamber. "Harry! Hurry up and open the door for me!" she shouted impatiently. Harry grinned as he caught up to her, whispering the parseltongue password.

After arriving in Gryffindor Tower again, he decided to be a bit nicer to Ron. Well, relatively nicer, at least. Seeing him completely asleep, Harry didn't bother wasting his time trying to wake him. "Aguamenti." The water splashed straight onto Ron's face, waking him instantly. He flailed around in bed before falling off. Getting up and seeing Harry, he sputtered, "Bloody hell, mate! What did you do that for?"

Harry simply replied, "I did it to wake you up, Ron. If you spent a single minute more asleep you wouldn't have time for breakfast. Now get packing, we've only got a little more than half an hour before we have to get on the carriages." He quickly started packing, ignoring Ron's protests. Seeing as how there was no possibility of taking another nap now that he and his bed were both drenched, Ron grudgingly changed out of his wet pyjamas and began packing his trunk.

Harry met Hermione in the common room, a solid ten minutes earlier than their first time around. Hermione actually arrived before he did, and watched him descend the stairs. "So, Harry, shall we go to breakfast?"

"Err... let's wait for Ron, actually. I made him get up this time, and I'd like to give him a second chance this time around." Harry watched the boys' dorm stairs hopefully. Five minutes later there were sounds of thunk-thunk-thunk along with quiet swearing. Harry shouted up the stairs, "You know you could just levitate the trunk, Ron." There was a pause, and while the muffled cursing continued, there were no more thumping noises to be heard. Ron appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

Without giving him a chance to catch his breath, Hermione quickly levitated her trunk and began walking out of the common room. "Hurry up, Ron, we've only got about fifteen minutes to catch some breakfast before we have to find a carriage."

They arrived at the carriages a few minutes later than last time, but they still managed to find an empty one. They still saw the dark, winged horses there to pull them. Hermione slapped her forehead, saying, "I forgot about them! I should have stopped by the library!"

Harry replied, "What are you saying? We only just had enough time to get breakfast. There's no way you could have looked it up, no matter how fast you can read, Hermione." This time, however, they noticed in the carriage in front of them was a young blonde girl, leaning over the front and petting one of the horses. "Well, at least we know they're not imaginary. That girl seems to be able to see them, too."

"And it looks the others can't... I wonder why?" The three other passengers of the carriage seemed to be avoiding her, only giving her strange looks and continuing their own conversations.

Once again, they found themselves riding the carriage to Hogsmeade with Neville. Having enough time to eat a proper breakfast seemed to improve everyone's mood, including Ron. Despite most people having already finished their breakfast, Ron practically cleared everything remaining on the table in the last fifteen minutes before everyone was shooed out of the Great Hall. A full Ron, apparently, was a mellow Ron.

Neville ended up asking the same question as last time. "Where were you this morning, Harry? You weren't in bed, but I didn't see you at breakfast, either."

I wonder if Ron's going to be the same as last time, thought Harry. Well, I'm giving him a second chance and let him have breakfast, too. Let's see how he takes it this time. Quickly glancing at Hermione before answering, he replied, "I was studying Runes with Hermione, since we won't be seeing each other very much over the summer. Divination's useless, so I'm dropping it in favour of Runes."

"Wow, that's pretty tough," said Neville. "I have to agree that it is pretty useless, though. My Gran never spoke highly of it. Maybe I should have taken Muggle Studies instead."

"Oh, don't bother with it. I have a hard time deciding which is more useless, Muggle Studies or Divination," said Hermione. She was glad to steer the conversation away from Runes as quickly as possible, to avoid another spat with Ron and another fifteen minute carriage ride sitting awkwardly to avoid eye contact with him.

"But that's only because you're muggleborn, Hermione!" said Ron. "Wizards don't know a thing about muggles!"

"And they still won't know a thing even after taking the course. All the stuff they have is at least fifty years out of date," said Hermione. "And that's just the technology. Let's not even talk about muggle fashion. That seems to change every decade or so. Your best bet for knowing what's going on in the muggle world is to get to know some muggles."

The rest of the carriage ride consisted of Hermione passionately explaining the great advances in human rights and equality that were made in the muggle world to Neville and Ron.

Entering the cabin on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione whispered to Harry, "I think we should make the Return Clusters again. Just in case of an emergency, you know? It could be a handy method of escape, especially since we can't apparate."

Harry nodded. "Is that what we're calling them now? I agree, in any case. How should we deal with Ron?"

"Well, if he handles it better this time around, I'm willing to forgive him, but I'm not going out of my way to stop him from opening that reckless mouth of his," Hermione said firmly, and brought out the blank sandstones once again.

"Wow, you two. You really are studying up to the last minute, aren't you?" Neville asked, surprised.

"What's with you two? It's summer vacation! You should be celebrating, not working!" Ron shouted.

"My summer 'vacations' are work," growled Harry. "I'd take studying with Hermione over the Dursleys any day. In fact, I love studying with Hermione. She always knows how to explain things to help me understand. " His expression softened, as he looked into Hermione's eyes with a sense of understanding, "...And she loves teaching me. You've never noticed how happy she becomes whenever she has the chance to share her knowledge with someone. I don't think I've appreciated her enough. I'm sorry, Hermione, for not noticing before. I could even give up Quidditch for you, Hermione."

Hermione was watching Harry with rapt attention as he made his little impromptu speech, with absolute joy filling her face as he finished. She was just about to say something in return when Ron shouted out loud, "WHAT? Give up Quidditch? For a girl? There's no way you could do that. Quidditch is the greatest game in the world! In fact, the next World Cup is going to be held here in Britain! You should come over to the Burrow and listen to the game on the Wireless, you'll never think about dumping Quidditch again!"

Harry only nodded as he and Hermione began to work on their set of runes. Ron turned to Neville to satisfy his Quidditch fever for the next few hours. Just as they finished, the tiniest owl they had ever seen came flying in the window, with a letter from Sirius. The excitement of the last two weeks made Harry nearly forget about his new godfather, but now he had written a letter stating that he was doing fine (for an escaped prisoner), that the Firebolt Harry received was a present from him, and for Ron to keep the owl. Ron was quite excited to have his own owl, especially after losing his "pet" rat.

As they arrived at the station, Harry gave Hermione a long goodbye hug before the Dursleys started to scream at him to get in the car.

Waving goodbye from the window, he realized it was going to be one of the longest summers ever.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- revising for this chapter's done. Not much changed, just added some thestral-vision.

Chapter 5: Communication

Two days. It had only been two days since arriving home that Harry felt the urge to write a letter. He didn't have anything in particular to talk about, but there were enough interesting developments at home that he managed to eke out a short letter to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

I know this is pretty quick, but I just wanted you to know how things are at my home. The Dursleys are actually a little nicer to be these days. By "nicer" I mean they all seem to be too miserable to bother me as much as they used to. For once, we're all eating the same amount of food! No, they'd never dare to give me a proper meal, but apparently somebody has noticed that Dudley has difficulty seeing his toes, and forget about touching them. The school nurse said he needed to eat less and move more. When uncle Vernon went to school to complain about it and demanded to see a doctor, they brought one in and he said both of them had to go on a diet! Now they constantly complain about not getting enough food, but they can't blame me for it, and Dudley's too tired to chase me around with his gang.

Besides the chores, I'm going to try studying. When I said I enjoyed studying with you on the train, Hermione, I meant it. I know the Dursleys would never stand to have you visit, but could you send me your notes and textbook for Ancient Runes? I'd like to learn as much as I can.

-Harry

The idea to learn more about runes came to him as he was writing the letter. He had seriously begun to appreciate the idea of not letting his time go to waste, and most of it was already being wasted doing chores for the Dursleys. He was glad Vernon had become too lethargic to stop him from sending letters with Hedwig, and she was a very clever owl who knew how to sneak out quietly for her deliveries. Tying the letter to his owl's leg, he whispered to her, "Stay with Hermione until she replies. Don't be afraid of asking for food, because you might be carrying a heavy load coming back." Hedwig hooted softly and took off.

Harry wasn't too surprised that the reply letter, along with textbooks and notes, arrived the next evening. Hedwig was obviously tired from carrying the huge load, and Harry had only managed to sneak a bit of sausage and a few owl treats for her to eat. Giving her a gentle pat, he said, "Thanks, girl. You did a great job. I'm sorry I couldn't save any more food for you. All this stuff must have been pretty hard for you to carry." Hedwig straightened up and gave him a haughty look. Harry chuckled at the sight, and reassured her, "Oh, no, Hedwig, I'm not doubting you at all. I just want to make sure you're well rested and fed." Hedwig nipped at him lightly with her beak, and after Harry untied all the packages from her leg, she flew out the window to do some night hunting.

Sorting through the stack of parchment Hermione had sent, he picked out the letter she had written him first, eager to read her reply.

Dear Harry,

I'm so glad you wrote to me! I haven't got an owl of my own, and I didn't realize until it was too late that I never knew your address or phone number, so there was no other way for me to contact you. I hope you keep writing often, and I'll keep a window open for Hedwig all summer!

I haven't thanked you enough for everything you did on the train, including letting Ron try not being a git. Sure, he lets his mouth run loose and it really gets on my nerves, but I'm glad you managed to patch things up a bit the second time around. You two are my best friends, and I know I can't stand to lose one of you. Although I have to admit I'd miss you a lot more than I'd miss Ron, but don't tell him that! When you stood up for me in the train, I was just about ready to jump across the cabin and hug you, but then Ron interrupted again. Him and his Quidditch... although I think the World Cup is a pretty big deal, especially since it hasn't been hosted in Britain for decades. Would you really choose me over Quidditch? Not that I want you to, Harry, you look so happy when you're up in the air. I'd never want to take that from you.

Lastly, I can't believe you asked for my notes! If you can catch up, then we can have another class together next year! First, the textbook I gave you isn't the official third year Runes text, but I found it was a lot more useful when studying. My notes are organized by...

The letter finished off with a lot of Hermione's studying tips and a guide to reading her notes, highlighting the most important pages of the textbook, and other advice to get him through all the course. Re-reading the letter, Harry smiled to himself. Hermione was really that happy when he said those things? He just said what had come naturally to him, but he was glad he had made her day before Ron interrupted.

That brought the thought of Ron back to him. He mentioned the Quidditch World Cup, didn't he? Maybe he could spend the last few weeks at the Burrow again. He decided to write a short letter to Ron, hoping it might help him get out of the house a bit earlier.

Dear Ron,

How are you doing, mate? You said there was the World Cup coming soon, didn't you? When is it happening? Do you think I could stay over at your place so we can listen to the game? I'm sure Hermione would love to come, too. Say hello to your mum and dad for me!

-Harry

He decided to wait until Hedwig had returned and finished her meal, a small squirrel. For an animal without hands or utensils, Hedwig managed to be an extremely clean eater and left no traces for Vernon or Petunia to find. Seeing that his owl was sated, he asked her, "Hey, girl! Are you ready for a quick trip to the Burrow? You don't have to wait up for Ron, he has his own owl now." Hedwig immediately hopped towards him and proudly stuck out her leg.

Over the next month, Harry exchanged several more letters with both Ron and Hermione. With Hermione, he asked her for help with the homework whenever he got stuck, and she readily gave it, although those instances were rare. Most of the coursework was rather simple to Harry, and he was picking it up very quickly. Again, vague feelings of having taken the course before stirred in his mind as he studied, helping him pick it up as quickly as he did. They also discussed what they should do with the beacon and if they were going to keep trying to improve it for the OWL project- or, in fact, whether they should present it at all, or keep it a secret. Hermione had also discovered what the winged horses were- they only appeared to those who had faced death before. The reasoning was

obvious for Harry, but Hermione must have experienced something horrific in her memories, even if neither of them completely remembered the future.

His letters to Ron remained pretty simple, as Ron could hardly contain his excitement about the World Cup, and had filled Harry in on some of the details. Bulgaria had one of the greatest rising stars of Quidditch, Viktor Krum, whose fantastic seeking skills nearly carried the team to the championships. Ireland was known for having extremely good teamwork, to the point where some people had accused them of cheating using mind-linking devices (all of which were false, of course). The two teams were expected to face off at the World Cup Finals.

His birthday came and went with no celebrations from the Dursleys, as he expected. It was still an extremely good day for him, however, because he received a few gifts and letters he received from his friends. He was worried that the extra owls would make the Dursleys angry, but apparently Hedwig had the foresight to fly around the neighbourhood and warn the other postal owls to only deliver during the night. He gave her a dozen owl treats for that. One of his greatest surprises was a letter from Sirius. His godfather had remembered his birthday! He happily opened up the letter first.

Happy Birthday, Pup!

I'm so thankful you gave me a chance back when we met in the Shrieking Shack. All I want is to see you grow up to be a proud, powerful wizard. I'm sorry I can't give you very much for your birthday, but here's some notes on how your father and I learned to become animagi. We started training in fourth year, and we managed to complete the transformation in fifth year. I hope my notes help, and I hope you'll take the Marauders into the next generation at Hogwarts.

I'm out of the country for the moment, so I'm sorry to say that I can't see you for your birthday. I can't receive owls from you or else they might find me, and I'm already taking a small risk sending you this letter, but I just had to wish my godson a happy birthday.

Love, Sirius

Animagus training! He felt a little dejected that, although Sirius was out of prison, he still wouldn't be able to contact him. Sirius, however, still managed to give him the perfect gift- he could learn a useful skill, and it felt like connecting to his father in a roundabout way. Putting the notes aside, he opened up the package from Hermione next.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! You've made so much progress with Runes, I'm so proud of you! I decided to get you a basic rune-carver's kit, which should last you until we graduate from Hogwarts. I also got you the book, *Cracked: The Craziest Curse Breakers*, which has stories on some of the most intricate wards ever found and the people who managed to break through them. I wish I could present these to you properly at a birthday party, but maybe we can have a belated party when we get to the Burrow.

Speaking of the Weasleys, you know that we still haven't had any revenge on Fred and George for their betting pool? I still can't believe them! We really need to prank them back, and I have the perfect idea...

Harry had completely forgotten about the twins. He grinned at the thought of Hermione putting her mind to getting revenge on the twins, at their own game, and at their own house! She really didn't do anything by half-measures. Ron's letter was short and to the point, as usual.

Happy Birthday Harry! We're all set to see you next week at the Burrow, and Hermione too! I got you *Quidditch Scores and Statistics* so you'll know more about what's going on when we listen to the game!

Harry opened the book and saw that it was, quite literally, a book on the statistics of all the professional Quidditch teams in Europe, as well as records of their matchups and scores for the past several years. He was already pretty shocked at the fact that Ron had sent him a book as a gift, but was almost completely floored by the fact that the book Ron had sent him was more boring than Hermione's gift. He set the book down and picked up the curse-breaker book instead, immediately fascinated by the multitude of runes and schemes that some ancient pharaoh or dark wizard had set up to

protect their earthly possessions. He was reading well past midnight before he finally fell asleep.

Harry Potter found himself sitting... no, cradled... in a large chair. He noted it was in an old, dilapidated, but formerly exquisite house, if the elaborate door was anything to go by. Looking down, he saw his own body, which was small, wrinkled, and deformed. Oddly enough, he wasn't shocked at the sight. He was feeling anticipation... Wait, thought Harry. That's not me... that's someone else feeling it... Realizing the emotions were not his own, he instinctively threw up his Occlumency shields. It dulled the images around him slightly, but he could now clearly tell what was happening. It was obvious to him that he wasn't dreaming- he was inside somebody else's mind.

"I-It is done, my lord." A quivering voice came from behind the chair. The chair swung around, and the speaker came into view. Harry saw who it was- Peter Pettigrew! He was angry, frustrated, and desperate to know where he was, where Pettigrew was. Oddly enough, he noticed some satisfaction coming from whoever he was inhabiting.

"Excellent, Wormtail. Now where is Nagini?"

~I am here, my lord.~ came the whisper from an extremely large snake.

~Dear Nagini, you will place yourself at the center of the binding formation. You shall be the next vessel of my immortality.~ Harry was surprised that the person he was viewing was speaking in Parseltongue. Wasn't it an extremely rare skill? Back in second year, half the school was suspicious he was the next Dark Lord just because he had the ability. The only other person he knew of with the skill was... Voldemort. Of course. Peter Pettigrew had run back to his old master, Lord Voldemort, and now Harry was seeing inside his head. They were performing some kind of ritual, with chalk outlines drawn across the floor in front of the fireplace, and some potions brewing off to the side.

~Master, there is a muggle standing just outside the room. You could complete the ritual immediately with him, could you not?~ suggested the snake.

~An excellent idea, Nagini~ replied Voldemort. Turning to Peter, he said, "Wormtail! Nagini tells me there is an old muggle listening to us just outside this room. Would you care to invite him to join us?"

Peter quickly left the room, and Harry heard the door behind him quickly open, and two sets of footsteps came marching inside.

"I don't know who you are, but I know enough that you're a murderer!" shouted the man defiantly. "I'm calling the police- and don't you dare touch me, because my wife knows I check this house every night, and she'll call the police as well if I'm not back home soon."

"Do not lie to me, muggle," said Voldemort. "Lord Voldemort always knows when you are lying. You live alone. Nobody will miss you."

"What did you call me?" asked the old man, refusing to let his fear get the better of him.

"A muggle. That is what you are, as I am a wizard. And you will address me as Lord Voldemort."

"Well, pardon me, my Lord. I've never met any wizard before in my life, nor have I ever met any Lords who break into another noble's manor to spend the night. This here is Baron Riddle's old home. Why don't you turn and face me like a man? A coward like you doesn't belong in the Riddle Manor!"

Harry could feel a geyser of rage ready to burst from Voldemort. He had far too much pride to let that comment slide. "Very well," Voldemort replied. "I will face you, but I will tell you that I am no coward, nor am I a man. I am becoming something far greater, and you will have the honour of dying to serve my greatness." The chair swivelled around, and now Harry could see who had been talking. It was an elderly man with an intense, battle-worn expression on his face. It seemed he was never one to back down against evil, and he certainly wouldn't be backing down now. His expression grew horrified when he saw Voldemort's body.

"Avada Kedavra"

Harry woke up with his scar throbbing. Voldemort was back! he thought. Keeping his Occlumency up, he tried to remember and

organize as much as he could. Recalling an earlier memory, or a message, he stopped in confusion. Didn't I tell myself that Voldemort only came back in at the end of fourth year? Pulling the memory back out of its encapsulated shell, he searched through it again. Right, just now I saw him as that mutilated baby thing. At the end of fourth year he gets his full body, and his full power, back. This is where it begins. I have to tell Hermione, and Dumbledore as well.

Quickly grabbing a quill and parchment, he wrote two letters.

Dear Hermione

I just had some kind of vision from Voldemort. He was with Wormtail! They were working together. Voldemort doesn't have a proper body yet, but he still had enough power to kill a muggle. He's planning on returning to power soon. We should talk about this as soon as we see each other in person.

Take care of yourself.

Harry

He rolled up the first letter and quickly began to write the second.

Professor Dumbledore

While I was asleep, I had some kind of vision involving Voldemort. I was seeing things from his perspective, and he was performing some kind of ritual and killed a muggle. I'm pretty sure it wasn't a dream, but I'm not sure how or why it happened.

Harry Potter

Tying the two letters to Hedwig's leg, he said "Deliver these quickly. Deliver the one to Dumbledore first, then hang around with Hermione after you deliver hers." Hedwig nodded in understanding and flew out the window.

He received the reply from Hermione right away, just before dawn. Did he wake her in the middle of the night? He'd have to apologize later for disturbing her sleep.

Dear Harry

This is incredibly important. I've thought about it for a bit, and a few things came to mind. First, you must have experienced this the last several trips back. I don't think we could have changed the timeline enough to stop Voldemort and Wormtail from working together. Secondly, neither of us bothered to send that memory back- I think we both felt it wasn't very important. The real key is the actual resurrection at the end of fourth year- we need to work to prevent that. I doubt Voldemort is causing many problems between now and then, if he's still stuck in that body until the ritual actually occurs.

I think this means we need to spend this year preparing, Harry. There's a few things I'd like to try out when we get back to school. I'll need access to the Room of Requirement to do it. We definitely need to discuss this when we meet at the Burrow.

I'll be waiting for you - Hermione

The reply from Dumbledore was succinct, and it arrived in the afternoon on the leg of a regular school owl.

Dear Harry Potter

Do not worry yourself over the visions. If any more occur this summer, take note of them, but do not fret. We can discuss them at the beginning of the school term.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

Harry sighed. He was hoping for some more insight or advice from Dumbledore, but all he said was essentially to wait until school starts. Did Dumbledore really sign all his letters with his full name? That looked like quite a hassle. Harry crumpled up the letter, throwing it in the trash. As he did so, he noticed another owl in the distance heading towards his window. Who was that from? As it came closer, he recognized the only owl he knew that would be barely bigger than the letter it was carrying. Pigwidgeon, Ron's tiny owl. Why would Ron be sending him letter now? They had already agreed to meet at the Burrow in a few days' time.

The little owl plopped onto his bed, hopping up to Harry excitedly. He reached out for the letter but the tiny owl kept ramming itself excitedly against his hands. "Stop it, Pig! You need to hold still for

me to get this letter, you know!" Hedwig hooted in agreement, looking down at the tiny owl in disdain. That seemed to get Pig to calm down enough so that Harry could retrieve the letter. It was certainly Ron's writing, all right, but even messier than before.

Harry! Get this, we just hit the jackpot! Dad got us tickets to the quidditch final! We won't have to listen to the game on the wireless, we can actually be there! I couldn't wait to tell you! I'll see you in a few days!

So that's what got Ron so excited. Harry had never watched a professional match before, so this would be quite interesting for him. He couldn't wait for the day to come, either.

One week later, came out of the fireplace at the Burrow on his back and covered in soot. "HARRY!" He heard a familiar shout as he sat up, and saw Hermione casting a quick dusting charm on him just before she launched herself at him, knocking him back down to the ground. He was so glad to see her again that he didn't resist her hug, but then quickly noticed everyone else watching.

"Um... Hermione... I think, uh, the Weasleys also want to say hello," Harry managed to whisper to her. Hermione, red-faced, backed away quickly. He got up and gave Ron a hug, waved to the twins and Ginny, and then turned to two unfamiliar Weasleys.

"You must be Harry Potter! Ron's told me so much about you. I'm Charlie." He held out his hand, which looked like it was capable of an iron grip. Harry gave him a firm handshake, but nearly winced at what Charlie considered "firm." He could feel the rough callouses and even noticed some scars all the way up his arm. Charlie noticed where Harry was looking, and said, "I'm a dragon handler. Rough work, but plenty of excitement."

Harry nodded. This was someone Hagrid could be good friends with. "Pleased to meet you," he said. He turned to the other new Weasley, and held out his hand. "I recognize you! You were in that book Hermione gave me for my birthday!" Harry smiled. "Bill Weasley, curse-breaker, right?"

Bill laughed. "And what book might this be?" Harry grabbed the book out of his trunk and handed it to him. Bill flipped through the pages until he found the article where he was mentioned. Reading the

whole thing with a grin on his face, he chuckled as he gave the book back to Harry. "Oh, I remember that job. It actually wasn't anything complex and we had a perfect plan to take it all down, but one of the rookies on the team reversed two of the steps. The wards were supposed to drop quietly, but instead we got the most fantastic light show in the middle of the night, and woke up half the village. So, what's got you interested in curse-breaking?"

Harry grinned at Hermione, and they started to get to know the oldest Weasley brothers. Both of them were very glad to know that Harry played for the house team, and Charlie especially, as he was the star seeker of Gryffindor before Harry took over the position. Pretty soon, the entire family was involved, looking to have an impromptu quidditch match. It was a smaller game, with only one beater, two chasers, and a keeper for each team. Arthur and Ron were the keepers, Fred and George were the beaters, and Charlie, Harry, Bill, and Ginny were the chasers. Molly didn't play and felt that it was rather improper for Ginny to play as well, but Charlie assured her that she would do fine in a pick-up game. Hermione was still afraid of flying a broom and decided to watch and keep score instead.

When they kicked off, Harry noticed Hermione smirking. He quickly found out why. Bill got the quaffle first, and Fred smacked the bludger towards him. Or at least, he tried. The bludger stuck to his beater's bat, and apparently he was unable to let go of it as well. Together, they flew towards Bill, who was surprised but managed to dodge around them. Ginny was right behind him, and George quickly smacked the Fred-Bludger combo away from his sister- and realized he was stuck to it as well. Stuck together and facing opposite directions, they kept spinning in spirals for several minutes until they managed to land on the ground in a heap. Everyone else couldn't stop laughing when they realized that the twins themselves had been pranked.

Hermione walked up to them, smiling sweetly, and said "That was for taking bets on Harry's love life at school. I hope you'll be more... considerate... in the future?" The twins nodded, so she cancelled the charm.

"We do believe"

"We've found ourselves"

"A new Hogwarts prankster!" The twins grinned at each other.

"Although, we did notice"

"You pranked us for taking bets"

"Not that we bet on the wrong results." Before Hermione could respond, they took off again, laughing.

The second game lasted an hour. Ginny surprised everyone with her skill as chaser, as she had never played with her family before. They were expecting Bill to do most of the work for that team, but apparently she was nearly as talented as her oldest brother, and they ended up quickly racking up points against Charlie and Harry. After an hour, they lead by 150 points, calling the game to an end.

At this point, Charlie, Bill, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were all interested in seeing how the former seekers would do against the current one. They proposed a seeker duel, Harry versus Charlie, on the family brooms so that they would be equally matched. Harry agreed, eager to test his skills. The seeker duel was simply a one-on-one race to catch the snitch between two seekers. They decided to go with the best of three rounds.

In the first round, the snitch moved towards Charlie first. Both of them raced towards it and it looked like Charlie was about to get an easy win, but it quickly changed direction and dropped straight down towards the ground. Charlie spun upside down in an attempt to grab it, but missed. Harry rocketed towards the ground, looking to intercept the snitch but it jerked to the right, forcing Harry to quickly brake and change direction. Charlie was now dropping straight down towards him, and the snitch headed towards the ground once again. Seeing how close to the grass the snitch hovered, Charlie had to pull back and slow down to avoid crashing, but Harry, already much closer to the snitch, accelerated and landed hard on the ground on all fours, trapping the golden, fluttering ball under his fingers. The entire round lasted little over a minute.

In the second round, the snitch moved too quickly to see and disappeared. Harry and Charlie slowly patrolled the field, looking for a flash of yellow. Charlie saw it first, and immediately shot towards the snitch. Harry followed, but was trailing by several body lengths.

They dove and swerved through the air chasing it, and Charlie never let his eyes away. Harry, being much smaller, was gaining on Charlie. They were neck and neck, both straining to grab the snitch on a high-speed straightaway when Charlie grinned, and threw himself forward. His much longer reach let him grab the snitch while it was still a foot ahead of Harry's fingers. Amazingly, Charlie managed to keep his other hand firmly gripping the broom, pulling himself back on with one arm before gently riding back down to the ground. Grinning, he said, "When you've reined in a few dragons yourself, jumping off a broom isn't all that scary any more." Molly, watching from the ground, had nearly fainted.

In the third and final round, the snitch seemed to be getting sneakier. After several short chases, where it kept disappearing into the grass, it reappeared directly in between them. Racing towards each other head-on, the snitch bobbed up and down and they could only guess where it would be the moment they came close enough to grab it. Charlie decided to go high, and Harry, apparently, mirrored his movements. They seemed to be playing a game of chicken when, at the last second, Harry copied the move Charlie made in the first round, spinning around and flying upside down, grabbing the snitch as it bobbed downwards again while very nearly clipping Charlie's feet with his own.

Everyone cheered for the fantastic display of skill the two seekers had shown them, as they headed back inside to get cleaned up and prepare for dinner. The duel was the talk of dinner, as Harry learned there were official names for some of the moves they had performed. He had never realized there was so much terminology to the game he played so often.

After dinner, Harry strode out to the field behind the Burrow where they had played Quidditch, relaxing and enjoying the fresh summer air. Hermione walked up beside him with a smile, and said, "I was really amazed at how well you fly, Harry."

"Thanks, Hermione," he said. "You played a pretty amazing prank on the twins, too. I think they learned their lesson."

"Do you think... you could teach me to fly?"

Harry was taken aback, but delighted, by the question. He never expected Hermione to start becoming more interested in flying.

"Sure, Hermione. I'd be glad to, especially since your notes helped me learn all about Runes this summer."

"Oh, thank you, Harry! I always felt the school brooms were so rickety, and I was always scared of going very fast, but you look so happy when you fly, that I thought I should give it another try, too. I think the Weasleys' brooms are in much better condition than the school ones, so since I was here, maybe I could practice with them. Can you give me some notes on broom riding? And what kind of exercises you do for Quidditch warm-ups? I could also read some books on broom-flying techniques, but if I had some of your notes I think that would..."

Harry couldn't keep the amusement to himself. "Err... Hermione... I don't have any notes. I just... fly the broom."

Hermione stopped, and her face fell. "But... how will I learn about it? Oh, I was hoping I'd be able to learn from you..."

Harry chuckled. "Hermione, you just have to get on a broom and fly it. I'll teach you. I promise. In fact, let me get my Firebolt right now, and we can ride it together." He ran inside to get his broom before Hermione could stop him, and minutes later came rushing out with his high-end, professional broom.

"Harry! I can't fly that thing! It's a professional broom! It's fast! It was a gift from Sirius! You've only had it for half a year! I have to study first before I try flying!" Hermione was panicking.

"Hermione! Calm down," said Harry. "I'll ride the broom with you, so don't worry. Flying is something you have to learn by experience, so we'll start our lessons right now." He grinned, moving behind her. "Here, just step over it. I want you to grip the handle..."

Hermione held the broom nervously and inhaled sharply as Harry wrapped his arms around her, gripping the broom just behind her hands. They began to rise slowly, hovering a few feet above the ground. Harry pushed the broom forward slightly, and they began to move forward. They glided slowly, between a walk and a run, until Hermione got used to speeding up and slowing down. When it came to practicing changing altitude or turns, Hermione was too nervous to lean over, causing the broom to move jerkily when they tried to change direction. The jerky motion only caused her to tense up even

more, so Harry attempted a different approach. Pulling her in closer and holding her across her stomach with one hand, he said, "Alright, Hermione. Just close your eyes, relax, and forget the broom. Just hold on to me, and I'll fly."

Hermione was hesitant, but trusted him. She held on to his arm, closed her eyes, and leaned backwards, pressing against him. Harry began by pulling back, angling upwards and rising into the air, reassuring Hermione as she rested against his body. He began a few wide, lazy turns while gently leaning to each side, forcing Hermione to rock back and forth as they performed a slow slalom. Eventually, they slowed to a stop and Harry said, "Open your eyes, Hermione."

She nearly shrieked, seeing how high they were, but noticed their feet were dangling just above the roof of the Burrow. In front of them was a beautiful sunset that took her breath away. Harry smiled. "I think this is one of the reasons why I love flying so much. You can get such a fantastic view."

Hermione wanted to turn around and hug him right then and there, but was too afraid of falling off the broom to do it. They watched the sunset for the next half hour until it dipped just below the horizon.

Chapter 6: The World Cup

Over the next few days, Ron and the other Weasleys were getting more and more excited. Mornings were spent listening to the Wizarding Wireless, covering the quarter- and semi-finals of the World Cup, after which they did a few chores around the house. In the afternoon, they had impromptu Quidditch games which often lasted until dinner. Harry decided to continue his flying lessons with Hermione after dinner, and took advantage of the privacy this time gave them.

The first morning they spent outside, de-gnoming the garden while listening to the game between Scotland and Luxembourg. Ron, having no particular team affiliations other than the Chudley Cannons, simply cheered for the teams hailing closest to home. Unfortunately for him, Britain as a whole was doing rather badly. As the game progressed, the Scots were doing worse and worse, and Ron took his frustration out on the gnomes. Every time Luxembourg widened their lead with another goal while he was holding a gnome, he would hurl it as hard as he could over the fence, as opposed to simply tossing it over. Harry and Hermione tried their best not to agitate him more. When the game finally ended and Luxembourg also caught the snitch while they were already well over 150 points in the lead, Ron punted the gnome he was holding over the fence. That caused Hermione to give him an earful on animal cruelty and humane pest-control tactics.

That evening, they talked about the significance of the vision Harry had the night after his birthday. Hermione asked a lot of questions, trying to squeeze out every detail he could remember. They managed to find a few relevant bits of information- the fact that Voldemort was hiding out in a building known as Riddle Manor. He had the help of Wormtail, and a snake named Nagini. Hermione was the one who reminded him of the effects of his Occlumency, which allowed him to distinguish the difference between his own emotions and Voldemort's. They both decided that Occlumency was a skill they had to work on, and master, as quickly as possible. Lacking a good method to test each other's mental shields, they realized they needed to learn Legilimency as well. Hermione decided that the next time they were in Diagon Alley, she would search Flourish and Blott's for a book on the mind arts.

The next day was Ireland versus Peru. All the other English teams had been knocked out of the running, but Ireland was a strong contender for the Cup. The task for the day was a thorough cleaning of the entire Burrow, and Ron would cheer loudly every time Ireland scored. It didn't seem so bad at first, and seeing Ron so cheerful helped lighten everyone's mood while working, but they soon realized the problem. Team Ireland was known for its amazing plays with their chasers- and they were regularly scoring a goal once a minute. That meant Ron spent as much time cheering as he did actually working. Harry wasn't quite sure whether Ron was more productive when his team was doing well, or doing poorly.

For their post-supper flight, Harry told Hermione how Sirius had given him notes on animagus training. Hermione's jaw dropped when he told her and very nearly wanted to end the flying lesson immediately to read them, but Harry quickly ascended into the air and refused to let her back down until they had done some proper flying. Still, they were eager to discuss the possibilities, or at least, Harry was. Hermione often kept him grounded in reality.

"What kind of animal do you wish you could be, Hermione?"

"You can't choose your animal, Harry. You have to discover it."

"It doesn't hurt to imagine! What would you like to be?"

"Oh, I don't know... maybe a lioness? It just seems natural, being a Gryffindor and all. Although, I doubt that if everyone in Gryffindor became animagi that we'd all become lions or lionesses."

"Well, if you were a lioness, then I wouldn't mind being a lion..." mused Harry.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at him, catching a glimpse of his jet-black hair flying wildly in the wind. "A lion? I don't know, Harry... I think you'd do better as a black panther..."

"A panther? What makes you say that?" asked Harry, as they changed direction and started circling the Burrow.

Quickly whipping her head back around and concentrating on looking straight ahead, she replied, "No reason... actually I pegged

you for being some kind of bird. Like a hawk, maybe. You certainly love flying."

"That I do, Hermione. I wish I could be a phoenix, like Fawkes. I'd be able to flash in anywhere and come to your rescue..." said Harry absentmindedly, with images of the battle against the basilisk in second year passing through his head.

Her heart fluttered at the image of Harry, a knight in shining armour- no, wait, a knight in flaming armour, descending from the skies to her rescue. "Y-You c-can't be a... um... a magical creature," she said, trying to calm herself down.

Harry noticed her nervousness, and quickly tightened his grip on the broom. "Oh! I'm sorry, Hermione. Are we too high up? Let's drop down lower to the ground. And yes, I know we can't be magical creatures in our animagus form, but I can always imagine it."

Oh, Harry, you silly prat. You have no idea what you're doing to me! fumed Hermione. "What do you think I'd become, Harry?"

"Well, I always thought you'd be a raven or an owl. Your intelligence has always been what I like best about you."

"They're both birds, Harry! Have you forgotten that I have absolutely no talent for being in the air?"

"You're getting better at it, aren't you? In fact, tomorrow I'd let you ride the broom yourself while I fly beside you." Harry grinned, speeding up and climbing higher into the air.

"Harry!" Hermione took control of the broom, slowing down and levelling out.

"See? You're so smart. Your flying's improved so much in just three days."

"Well, I have you to thank, Harry. Besides, if you think my intelligence is my best trait, maybe I should become a dolphin, or an elephant. They're some of the smartest animals on the planet."

"Well, I'm not sure how useful a dolphin would be. I wouldn't want you to transform and then flop around on land, or transform back to a human in the water and end up with your clothes soaking wet."

"No, I don't think that would be useful, either. I wonder how many animagi are actually sea creatures?"

"I don't know, but I'm certain I won't be. I've never been to the ocean before. But if you turn into an elephant, that would be pretty interesting. Would you let me ride you?"

Hermione turned beet red, but Harry didn't notice, being right behind her and his view blocked by her hair. "R-Ride me?"

"Yeah! You know, I could climb on your back and... then... uh..." Harry suddenly realized what he was saying, and blushed furiously himself. They finished the flying lesson that day in silence.

The last day before they were set to leave was a day off for the children. Percy finally came home from his job at the ministry, giving only a short, formal hello to Harry and Hermione. In fact, he brought some of his work home with him, continued to toil away in his room. The twins, of course, wasted no time in their attempts to ruin his productivity and force him to take a day off. Hermione, ever the organized one, was already carefully packing and getting ready for the trip, which would begin early in the morning the next day. Harry followed her lead and packed his trunk, while Ron continued to listen to the last semi-final match on the Wireless, Bulgaria vs. Luxembourg.

Ginny watched Hermione pack her trunk while sitting on her bed. Like last year, Ginny shared her room with Hermione during the last week of summer and had become fast friends. This year, however, she had remained relatively quiet. She was silent for several minutes, but suddenly said, "Hermione? Can I ask you a question?"

Without slowing down her packing, Hermione said nonchalantly, "Sure, Ginny. What do you want to know?"

Ginny got up from the bed and closed the door to her room. "Hermione... do you like Harry?"

Oh no, thought Hermione, as she froze. Ginny's had a thing for Harry for years... what do I tell her? Slowly turning to face Ginny, she asked cautiously, "Um... why do you ask?"

"You know why," Ginny replied with a hint of pain in her voice. "I've always loved Harry, ever since I was little, but these past few days I've seen you with him... even though you said you weren't going out with him..."

"I'm not!" said Hermione defensively. "There's nothing going on... at least, not yet..." Not yet? Do I really want this? Harry's so sweet to me even though he doesn't seem to realize it... maybe I should tell him after the World Cup is over, she thought.

"So you do want him, don't you? How could you, Hermione? I told you last summer how much he means to me! I've loved him for so much longer than you!" cried Ginny.

"What? You've barely talked to him! I don't think you exchanged more than a few words ever since you met. How could you possibly love him?" Hermione shot back.

"But I do! I grew up with all the stories about him..." answered Ginny.

Hermione grabbed Ginny and looked at her, face to face. "Ginny! Those were just stories! If you haven't talked to him in person, how could you possibly know? You barely know him better than any of the other thousands of girls who grew up with stories of the Boy-Who-Lived!"

"But... But..." Ginny stammered, searching for an explanation. "But Harry saved me in first year! He rescued me from the Chamber of Secrets! He's so special to me... and he must care for me more than the other girls..."

"Ginny, this is exactly what I mean," said Hermione. "You don't understand Harry... you don't realize how he grew up never knowing his parents. Or how hard it is for him to make a real friend in the wizarding world. Or how he would have risked his life to save anyone without thinking twice." Or how he can be so romantic without even realizing it, she said to herself.

"Anyone? What do you... how do you know that? He saved me!" she asked, nearly in tears.

"Ginny... Harry went to stop the basilisk to save everyone in school. He didn't even realize you were the one who was captured until he got down there. He told me the whole story when I was cured of the petrification."

Ginny started bawling as she understood. "I c-can't believe it. I-I always thought I w-was special to hi-him." She sniffed loudly. "Now it's like... like I've lost him... he doesn't even no-notice me." She cried harder with that thought.

Hermione sat beside her and patted her back. "Ginny... you've never lost Harry. You've lost the Boy-Who-Lived. He's just a fantasy, and he always has been. You can still talk to Harry and be his friend." Hermione continued to comfort her friend until it was time for dinner.

After dinner was over, Hermione actually led Harry outside, excited for another flying lesson with him. Ginny's conversation had stirred her feelings and forced her to admit, to herself at least, that Harry was a very sweet, brave, and kind boy. She could hardly wait for another flight with his arms wrapped around her. He would whisper some advice in her ear, and she'd perform admirably, and he'd hug her a little tighter in congratulations... She snapped out of her little daydream to see Harry standing in front of her with a wide grin. He was holding two brooms. He held one out to Hermione. "Hermione! You've been learning so quickly! I knew you could learn things without having to read about it. Since today's the last day we can have these little lessons, I thought you could try riding a broom yourself!"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "But... But..." But I want to ride the broom with you! I want you to be right there with me pressed against my back!, she thought furiously, but she didn't dare embarrass herself by saying it out loud.

Harry tilted his head to the side. "What's wrong? Oh, don't be nervous. You'll do fine, don't worry. I'll be right there with you. Come on." Without waiting for any more protests from Hermione, he hopped on his own broom and began floating up. "Just stay close, and we'll fly beside each other, and I can keep giving you advice."

Hermione, to her own dismay, flew admirably. Her desire to fly tandem with Harry again was outweighed by her fear of actually falling off her broom if she "pretended" to make mistakes. It was the most unsatisfying flight ever since Madam Hooch's broom-riding lesson.

Around midnight, while everyone in the house was sleeping, Ginny crept downstairs and sat on the couch in front of the fireplace with her favourite books. She opened the first one.

Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful witch and a powerful wizard who loved each other very much. They were the Potters, and they had a beautiful baby boy named Harry...

Ginny sighed. The books rarely talked about Harry's parents, and they were often only mentioned in passing. What were their names again? She didn't even know...

...and You-Know-Who came knocking at the door. "Let me in!" he shouted.

"Never! You'll never find out how to get inside." came the reply from the Potters.

"I will tell you how to sneak in," said Sirius Black, You-Know-Who's most trusted man. "The Potters made me their Secret Keeper. I know of a secret trap door in their garden! I can show you where it is!"

Ginny knew the story of how Sirius Black had betrayed the Potters. Ron told her later that it was actually Peter Pettigrew, who was actually Scabbers, who was the Secret Keeper... oh, it was so confusing. But leading Voldemort to a trap door in the garden? That couldn't possibly be what it meant to be a secret keeper.

"I will stop you with my spells!" said Mr. Potter. He cast all the most powerful spells at You-Know-Who, but it wasn't enough. They fought and they fought, but You-Know-Who's spells were more powerful than Mr. Potter's. He defeated Mr. Potter and walked upstairs.

"I will stop you with my potions!" said Mrs. Potter. She threw her most powerful potions at You-Know-Who, but it wasn't enough. You-Know-Who blocked them with his shield, and Mrs. Potter ran out of potions. He defeated Mrs. Potter and walked into the bedroom.

"How will you stop me, boy?" asked You-Know-Who.

Harry Potter stood up and faced him. "I don't have to stop you, because you can never hurt me!" he said.

"What? I am the darkest Dark Lord that has ever existed! Why do think that I can't hurt you?" shouted You-Know-Who.

Harry answered, "Because I am Pure of Heart, and you are Evil! Your Evil magic can never hurt a good boy like me!"

You-Know-Who got angry and cast his most powerful spell, the Killing Curse, at Harry Potter. But Harry was such a good boy and his heart was so pure that the Killing Curse couldn't touch it, and bounced back.

"Nooo! How could this be? I have been defeated by my own Dark Magic!" cried You-Know-Who as he died. The whole world cheered for Harry Potter for getting rid of the evil You-Know-Who and he lived happily ever after.

Ginny blinked. It had been years since she read the book again, but it all seemed so silly now. Harry Potter didn't know how he defeated Voldemort. In fact, nobody knew how it happened. The Killing Curse killed instantly, so Voldemort couldn't have wailed in his defeat. And lastly... sadly, Harry Potter did not live happily ever after. Ron, Fred, and George had told her how Harry got locked up in his own room at the Dursleys. She sighed, putting the book down, and opened up the next one.

Harry Potter Adventures: The Serpent King

Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, was on an adventure with his friends in the jungle.

Ginny paused at the first line. There were so many errors right in the very first line. Harry had no friends until Hogwarts- his only friends were Ron and Hermione. He had never been on any vacations,

never travelled outside of London, and certainly never marched through a jungle.

"The Serpent King can talk to snakes! He commands them to attack our village! He is an evil wizard!" said another villager.

Harry Potter knew that You-Know-Who talked to snakes, too. The Serpent King must have been using dark magic. Harry Potter knew he would have to defeat him or else his evil would spread throughout the world.

Ginny paused here. Obviously, nobody would have guessed that Harry Potter himself was a Parselmouth. He was the living proof that being a Parselmouth didn't make you a dark wizard.

"You can never defeat my monsters," said the Serpent King. "Now, you will have to face the most powerful snake of all: the Hydra!"

The hydra was a giant snake with seven heads. The Serpent King hissed and whispered to the hydra. "I just told my hydra to attack you! What are you going to do?"

Harry Potter walked up to the seven-headed beast and pulled out his wand. He cast a spell to cut one of the monster's head off. It was so big that it shook the ground when it fell. Right away, the Hydra grew its head back! "Ha ha, you can never defeat my Hydra, Harry Potter! It can keep regrowing its heads as long as one of them still remains! You can't cast your spells fast enough!"

Harry was supposed to have a wand when he was underage? Somehow, it never occurred to her that he never should have owned a wand in any of these adventures.

Harry Potter said, "Maybe not by myself, but I have friends to help me! Let's defeat it together!" All seven children cast the spells at the same time, and all seven of the hydra's head were cut off at the same time...

Ginny thought back to Harry's real adventures. Ron told her about their first year, and Harry ended up facing Quirrel alone. In her first year, Harry ended up facing Tom and the basilisk alone. Harry really seemed like he was always forced to face his attackers by himself...

They tied up the Serpent King and brought him back to the village. The villagers all thanked him. Harry Potter and his friends left the village to search for the next adventure.

Ginny closed the book. Harry had certainly had his fair share of adventures, but he never really did go looking for trouble, did he? All this time, she had been reading from authors, and the authors obviously had no idea who Harry Potter really was. She didn't bother opening the last book. She knew it only contained more fantasies. Hermione said that Harry had never even seen these stories himself. What would he think if he saw them? Laugh? Cry? Get angry? She couldn't even hazard a guess- she really didn't know him, after all. Walking up to the fireplace, she tossed all three books into the fireplace, with a few silent tears falling down her cheeks as she watched them burn.

The next morning was even more frenetic than Sept. 1st, which was amazing, since half the house was still half asleep. It was early in the morning, well before sunrise, but they needed to be out of the house by five to catch the portkey. Every two minutes it seemed like somebody had forgotten something, rushing up to their rooms and back downstairs. After a hearty breakfast, they began their walk to the scheduled portkey site. Only the children who had yet to come of age would be taking the portkey, so Bill, Charlie, and Percy would apparate on their own, letting them sleep in.

The group of them arrived at the site, and were greeted by the Diggory family. Apparently they would all be travelling together. Everyone gave pleasant, but tired, greetings and Mr. Weasley showed them the portkey: an old, tarnished metal bowl. When Cedric reached for the bowl, however, an uncomfortable feeling came over Harry and he grabbed Cedric's wrist. Cedric looked at him in confusion. Harry, unsure of what he was doing, looked back at him. "Umm... Cedric... Have you ever had any... unpleasant experiences with portkeys?"

Cedric raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Well, I had my first portkey ride when I was six, and I felt nauseous afterwards. I've gotten used to it since then, though. First time for you, Harry?"

"Err... No... I mean, yes. I just... got the feeling that taking a portkey wasn't good for your health, Cedric," Harry replied. He had the déjà vu feeling again. Something about Cedric, portkeys, and winning...

they didn't mix. Well, what are they winning here? Maybe it was a different portkey he had to worry about.

Cedric's father, Amos, laughed. "Oh, don't you worry, my boy. Portkeys are perfectly safe. Certainly safer than any muggle contraption you've ever ridden in, isn't that right, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley nodded. "That's right. It does feel a little odd, but it won't hurt. Now hurry up, you have to have your hands on the portkey in thirty seconds."

Harry let go of Cedric's wrist and placed his hand on the bowl. Cedric did as well. "Five... four... three... two... one..." With a tugging feeling at his navel, they whirled away to the World Cup camping grounds. Harry fell over on arrival, knocking Hermione and Ron over. The twins laughed as Mr. Weasley helped them up.

"Is that why you were so worried about the portkey, Harry? Surely you're not afraid of a bruise or two? You've had far worse injuries from Quidditch alone," Cedric said to him.

"Umm... no, that's not... well, never mind," Harry muttered.

Cedric grinned and slapped him on the back. "No need to be embarrassed about it, Harry. It takes a few tries to really get used to it."

"Well, our camping site's this way, Amos," said Mr. Weasley. "We'll be seeing you!"

They waved goodbye to the Diggorys as they parted ways. As they trekked across the grounds, Hermione leaned over to Harry, whispering, "What was all that about, Harry?"

He whispered back, "I don't know, but it was a horrible feeling... I thought Cedric was going to die if when he touched a portkey. Maybe I was wrong..."

"It must have been one of your memories from the other trips. Maybe it was a different portkey that you have to stop him from touching."

Harry nodded in reply. It was certainly more than instinct, it was something he had experienced, but forgotten. "We should practice our Occlumency tonight. Maybe I can dig up some more detail if I meditate on it."

There wasn't much else to do, in fact. Most of the Weasley boys, save Percy, spent a good portion of the day playing pick-up quidditch with the neighbouring campers. In fact, there were so many people flying around on broomsticks that Hermione couldn't practice flying without the possibility of crashing into someone. Harry spent the day wandering the campgrounds with Ginny and Hermione. There were plenty of merchants selling random trinkets and carnival stalls to make a quick Galleon, but nothing to hold their interest. They had retired by mid-afternoon to practice their Occlumency. Ginny left them to help her father around the tent.

Ron came back from his game some time later, walking in on the two of them sitting in the tent's living room. "Hey, what are you doing, mate?"

"We're practicing Occlumency," answered Hermione.

"What's that?"

"It's a way of organizing your mind," said Harry. "It's pretty useful. You should try it."

"You sure? It looks kinda boring..."

"Ron, you think everything that isn't Quidditch is boring," said Hermione.

"Just try it, Ron. It makes learning stuff in school a lot easier, too," said Harry.

"...Alright, fine." Ron sat down with them. "How do I do this?"

"Well, first close your eyes and imagine a place that will keep you calm, maybe some place you know very well and you're comfortable in," said Hermione.

Ron's made several faces over the next few minutes before finally settling down to a small grin. "What place did you pick, Ron?"

His grin grew wider. "Quidditch pitch. And everyone's cheering for me."

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. "Ron, the place you imagine isn't supposed to make you feel good, it's supposed to make you feel nothing at all! Try again!"

"It's hard! What kind of places do you use?" complained Ron.

"Empty sky, above the clouds. It's all blue above me and endless clouds below," answered Harry.

"Underwater, deep below the surface," said Hermione.

"Wait, so you guys have been sitting around here thinking about practically nothing?" asked Ron incredulously.

"Well, yeah. That's the start of it, at least," answered Harry.

"This is even worse than studying for exams," said Ron. "We're at the World Cup! I'm going outside to have some fun." He got up and left the tent, muttering to himself.

"It's his loss," said Harry, shrugging. "What did you want to try next?"

"I wanted to get started on Animagus training, Harry." Hermione grinned. "I've been reading through Sirius's notes a few more times and I think it actually overlaps with Occlumency exercises."

"Really? How do we begin?"

"Well, the key to finding your inner animal is to tap into your most basic, primal emotions. You have to focus on thoughts that make you incredibly happy, sad, angry, fearful, and so on."

Harry listened and began to think. He already had practice finding thoughts that made him happy, which he used to cast a Patronus. Receiving his Hogwarts letter and discovering he was a wizard. Finding out Sirius was his godfather. Catching the snitch for the first time in Quidditch. He could feel very happy with those memories. Fear was nearly as easy, as he could remember the effects of the Dementors- the chilling feeling and the screams of his mother

coming to mind. Anger, though, was more difficult. Had he ever truly been angry? He supposed the Dursleys did make him mad, but after living with them for over a decade, it was all he had known, and he had gotten used to the neglectful attitude of his aunt and uncle. He knew Hermione grew extremely angry when she found out how they treated him, but he couldn't evoke the same kind of emotion. Draco Malfoy was certainly an annoyance at school, but for the most part, he was only that- an annoyance. He would have to search his memories harder to find something that truly made him mad, as well as the other primal emotions.

The two of them continued to meditate until everyone was back in the tent for dinner. Everyone was excited about the match tomorrow, and they were all discussing the strategies and plays they were expecting to see in the game. Hermione was not happy to find out that the twins had placed a bet on the outcome. Their argument that they had bet with the Director of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman himself, didn't help at all. The discussions and debates ran well into the night, when all of them finally crawled into their beds for the game, which was to begin at noon.

The events surrounding the game had been as exciting as the game itself. The mascots for each of the teams were very good at swaying the crowds and supporting their team. The Irish naturally had leprechauns, who conjured gold for the crowds and taunted the opposing team in an extremely distracting manner. The Bulgarian team's mascots were Veela- a very wise choice, given the audience in attendance was mostly male. They were extremely beautiful women who quickly swayed the crowds to them when they let loose some type of aura. Harry immediately felt it intruding on his mind, compelling him in some way to give himself over to them, but quickly threw up his Occlumency shields and the thoughts disappeared. Ron and the other Weasleys, however, weren't quite so lucky. Bill was the only one who also seemed to be completely resistant to the charms. It was hard to blame the others, though, as even the referee seemed to fall under their spell at one point.

The game was also the most exciting match of Quidditch Harry had ever watched. The game began with a fast pace with the Irish chasers taking control of the game. They never let up, but the Bulgarian beaters and keepers kept a strong enough defense to keep the game exciting. Viktor Krum of the Bulgarian team was clearly the better seeker, and throughout the game he kept

extremely active, luring the bludger, distracting the keeper, and even tricking his opposing seeker into thinking he had found the snitch more than once. Harry learned a lot from watching his play, and resolved to do much more than simply look for the snitch during his future Quidditch games. Amazingly, despite all the action, Krum still managed to keep an eye out for the snitch. He ended the game by catching it, but their team lost due to the extremely large lead the Irish chasers had managed to create. Ireland took home the World Cup.

On their way out the stadium, they ran into the Diggory family again. Cedric waved them over, grinning. "What a game, eh, Harry? This may be my last year at Hogwarts, but I'm sure you'll be flying like Krum in no time."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "I don't know if I'll ever be as good as him, but I certainly learned a lot watching him play. I'm going to test out a few of the moves I saw today."

Cedric laughed. "Well, when you start slaughtering the other house teams with your plays, at least I won't be blamed for Hufflepuff's losses."

Harry smiled widely as his rival seeker complimented him. "Thanks, Cedric. Don't sell yourself short, though, you're a great seeker."

Smiling back, Cedric replied, "Thanks, Harry. I'll be seeing you later. I'm glad Ireland took home the trophy tonight- we'll be celebrating after we portkey back home, I'm sure."

Portkey. Trophy. Cedric. The thoughts rang through his mind. Turning to Hermione, he whispered, "Hermione! I'm getting that bad feeling about Cedric again... something about trophies and portkeys... do you remember anything from the first three trips we took?"

"Not as much, Harry. They seemed even less clear after we took the trip through the new beacon. I've forgotten nearly everything that wasn't packed into an Occlumency capsule in my head," she whispered back. Harry knew it was true. All of the most important information he still remembered- the improvements to the beacon, the location of the Room of Requirement, the horcruxes, and so on... everything else had nearly disappeared.

"I want to keep an eye on him. I have a feeling something bad's going to happen."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I'll grab the Return Clusters from my trunk, Harry. We might need them. Be careful."

Harry snuck away from the group, tailing Cedric. He only followed him for a few minutes before Cedric reached his exit portkey with his family, and they left the grounds, safe and sound. Huh, thought Harry. I guess I was wrong after all. At that moment, he heard some screams in the distance, and the crowd suddenly seemed to be moving more quickly. Looking in the direction of the screams, he saw people being lifted into the air, tossed around like rag dolls... by people in dark cloaks and white masks.

Nearly everyone around him was running and screaming now. He quickly ran towards the Weasleys' tent, and saw a large group with red hair making its way through the crowd. He ran towards them as fast as he could, but he noticed one person missing from the group. "Where's Hermione?" he shouted.

"Isn't she with you, Harry? You both gave us a fright wandering off by yourselves!" Arthur said to him worriedly.

"No! She's back at the tent! I have to go get her!" Harry ran off as quickly as he could, before anyone could object.

"Harry! It's not safe at the campgrounds! We have to evacuate! Let the Aurors handle it!" he heard the shouting behind him. He couldn't do that... he had to save her. The Aurors might not get there in time. She could get hurt. Or she might already be hurt, he thought. He didn't dare slow down until he reached the Weasley tent.

"Well well, looks like I can finally have some fun with this mudblood here," he heard as he entered the tent. He saw one of the masked, robed men. He immediately cast an Expelliarmus from behind, disarming the man, followed by a Stupefy. He quickly rushed over to Hermione, who was slumped down beside her trunk. Fear and horror rushed over him. He grabbed her, holding her close, but noticed she was still breathing. Good, he thought. I haven't lost her.

Just then, he heard another voice from the entrance of the tent. "What's taking so long? Don't tell me you're shagging some bint in there- Oi!" He heard heavy footsteps come into the tent. There was obviously no place to hide in the tent, so he did the only thing he could think of- attack. He ran out of the bedroom, casting an Expelliarmus at the second intruder, followed up by banishing a chair towards him. The new attacker was evidently on alert when he saw his unconscious partner, and quickly threw up a shield to block the disarming charm, but was hit by the chair. He grunted angrily, "You little runt! I'll get you for that!"

Harry threw a couple more spells at the man- stunners, disarmers, tripping jinxes mixed in with another banishing charm here and there. The man he was facing was not a very adept dueller, but he held his own through brute strength and magic. He kept up a shield that deflected most of Harry's spells, and was barely fazed by the objects Harry banished towards him. He sent a bludgeoning curse at Harry, knocking him back into the bedroom and turned to revive his partner.

Harry knew he was completely outclassed once he got hit by the bludgeoning hex. It hit him harder than anything he could remember. It broke a few of his ribs and threw him backwards a good ten feet. Obviously his opponent was the type who lacked finesse, but made up for it in spades with sheer, brute force. Now that he had to face two of them, both of them right outside, there was no escape for the two of them. Thinking quickly, he banished the bed towards the entrance, and threw a sticking charm. He hoped it would hold for just enough time...

Picking up a rune cluster, he pressed it against Hermione's chest and forced as much magic as he could muster, quickly charging it up until it flashed a bright white. Wasting no time, he grabbed the other cluster and held it against his own chest. He heard some amused laughter from behind the bed. "Looks like the runt thought this could stop us. Heh. Reducto." The bed practically exploded, sending splinters of wood flying into Harry. He managed to shield his face with his arms, but pieces of wood pierced both his arms and legs. He could barely hold up his wand now, and he was almost magically exhausted. Forcing every last bit of magic he could muster into the runes, they began to glow.

"What do you have there, kid? You still want to fight? Diffindo." Pain erupted through his right arm as the severing charm sliced it open,

causing him to drop his wand. Just a little more, he thought. With every last bit of effort, he picked up the wand with his left hand and kept it pointed at his chest, forcing more magic into the cluster. I'm almost there...

"I'll take care of this one," said the first man, pointing his wand at Harry. Muttering something incomprehensible, Harry could only see a flash of light before he fell unconscious.

Author's chapter end notes:

- Yes, the references to the lioness/panther animagus forms are a nod to Vox Corporis by MissAnnThropic. One of my favourite animagus-harry fics.

Chapter 7: Missing the Train

Hermione was trying to remember where she was. She could remember huge crowds, much like being at a football game. There was shouting... running... she was getting something important... someone had attacked her! Her heart jumped, the small adrenaline rush bringing her to full alertness. Lifting her head, she noticed she had been hovering just over Harry's face. The position was very familiar. Using her wand to light up the room, she confirmed it- they were back in the Chamber of Secrets. Why are we back here? I never got a chance to activate the cluster, thought Hermione. She looked back at Harry. Unless he came back for me... Hermione realized that this must have been what happened. He must have risked his life to save hers. I owe my life to him, she thought, gently caressing his face. He looks so peaceful sleeping like this. I could watch him for hours.

She suddenly realized that she never had the chance to watch him sleep in her lap before. Why did I wake up first this time? she wondered. Oh well, at least I'm not waking up with a bloody lip. In fact... maybe I can wake him up with a kiss... She giggled at her thoughts of a reversed fairy-tale ending. Leaning closer to him, she was debating with herself. Should I? Shouldn't I? He just saved my life and I want to kiss him for it, but he's asleep! That's like stealing! She continued to agonize over Harry's lips when he suddenly jerked awake, smacking straight into Hermione as usual.

Damn you, Fates! Do we have to do this every time? thought Hermione grudgingly. She didn't let it distract her, though, as she rushed over to Harry and immediately hugged him. "Harry!" she cried. "You saved me, didn't you?"

Harry, ever the modest one, didn't quite know how to answer such a blunt question. "I... er... I guess I did. But you saved me just as much, getting those Return Clusters out..."

"Don't say that! It's my fault you had to come after me in the first place... you had to fight off the man who attacked me!" Hermione sobbed into Harry's shoulder. "I can't imagine how hard that must have been."

"Oh, him? I disarmed and stunned him before he saw me. He... uh... wasn't the problem."

"What? Why did you have to send both of us back in time, then? Couldn't you have caught up with everyone again?"

Oh, bollocks. Why did I have to say that? Now I'm just going to get her more upset. Maybe I should just... no, I can't lie to Hermione. Heck, even if I tried she'd see right through me, thought Harry. "Well, it was actually the second guy who came in..."

Harry began to explain everything that happened during the night of the World Cup. She hugged him tighter and tighter until he got to the part where he was knocked back and broke a few ribs, and she instinctively let go. They both laughed when they realized that he couldn't possibly have transferred his injuries from the future, so Hermione embraced him once again. She began crying outright when he told her that he used up most of his strength sending her back first, and barely had any left for himself.

"Don't do that again, Harry! How could you? You might not have made it back! You would have forgotten... everything... we did together." Hermione thought of all the letters they exchanged, the week at the Weasleys, and especially the evenings.

"But... you would have lost this summer, Hermione. You seemed so happy... I didn't want you to lose that joy you had this summer. If I had to do it again, I'd do the same thing. You're everything to me..." Harry said solemnly, but Hermione tackled him. Harry, taken completely by surprise, fell on his back without resistance. Hermione straddled him with an angry, but affectionate look on her face.

She began to hit him on his chest with every word she spoke. "Don't... you... ever... think... like... that... again!" She fell down on top of him. "You're everything to me, too," she whispered into his ear. They lay there in the Chamber of Secrets holding each other, silently enjoying each other's presence, because they both knew how close they had come to losing it.

Harry eventually commented, "I'm glad you brought the clusters with you to the game, Hermione. We might have never made it without them."

Hermione, still laying on top of Harry, whispered, "Yes, that was what I thought of first when you mentioned Cedric, and you thought

he was going to get hurt because of one of the futures you experienced. I remembered they could be used as a means of escape. What happened with Cedric, anyways?"

"Nothing. He left before the attacks started. I guess it wasn't the World Cup where he gets hurt. I do know it had something to do with the cup... or a cup... and a portkey." Harry took a deep breath, and stroked Hermione's hair. "You know, I'm glad you thought of that, because I never would have come up with it myself. I only did it because I noticed you had brought them out of your trunk when I ran over to you. I'm just glad I charged them up in time."

Hermione sat up quickly, her eyes wide. "Oh... that's why I sent it... I had no idea it would happen so quickly, though..." she mumbled.

"Sent what?" asked Harry.

"I... um... I wanted to save it for after the summer when we got back to Hogwarts, and I wasn't sure if I should have gone through with it, but now..."

"Hermione, slow down. What did you send? What are you talking about?"

Hermione took a deep breath to calm down. "Along with the plans for the improved beacon, there was also a design for a... different... Return Cluster."

"Really, Hermione? Is it a better design? Why didn't you mention it before?" Harry was surprised that Hermione wouldn't think of using such knowledge to her advantage right away.

"Well, there's three reasons," she began. "First, I had left myself a message saying the design was untested, so I didn't use it. Secondly, I wanted to finish the new beacon as fast as possible, and the two of us only managed to complete it right before school ended. And the last..." she hesitated.

"What is it? It can't be that bad, can it?" asked Harry.

"It... it's essentially a blood ritual!" she cried. "I'd have to carve the entire Return Cluster into your body, along with a few extra ones..."

and they'd need to be permanent, so they would have to be scarred. I didn't want to do that to you!"

Harry goggled at her, but kept calm. "But there's... some advantage to it, right? I mean, more than keeping it with me all the time, because we could always just make the Return Cluster into a necklace or something if we needed to keep it nearby. You wouldn't have invented it if there wasn't some huge advantage, would you?"

"Um... well, it's supposed to be bound to your life," said Hermione. "If you ever died or came close to dying, it would activate automatically without your having to charge it up."

Harry's jaw dropped. "You're telling me that there's a way to automatically come back if I die? We're testing this thing out. As soon as possible. How long will it take?"

Hermione was shocked at his sudden acceptance of the idea. "Um... it could take a couple hours... wait, we don't have time to do this! We'll miss the train!"

Harry had completely forgotten what they had come back to. They would always come back to an unpacked trunk just before it was time to go. "Gah! He cried, bolting to his feet. How much time have we got this time around? Calentempa." The time spell showed 1994, June 30th, 11:40 AM. Both of them stared at the time. The Hogwarts Express had left the station well over an hour and a half ago. "Why did we wake up so late this time?" he asked Hermione.

"I think... maybe it was because we were both unconscious when we got sent back. Our most recent experiences and memories dominate, remember?"

Harry nodded. "Wait, how about the new design that you sent back to yourself? Won't that kind of send us back... er... dead?" he asked awkwardly, unsure of how to phrase it properly.

Hermione shook her head. "No, that has to do with a few of the modifications for this one. I'll explain it in detail, but essentially it continually makes a copy of your memories, so if you die, it sends back your memory and experience of about five minutes beforehand. The other runes monitor your health and keep the whole thing permanently charged up."

Harry understood. "Well... since we've already missed the train, why don't we sneak up to the Room of Requirement to try it out?"

"Harry! What about getting home? Should you be worried..." Hermione stopped, realizing that Harry had no desire whatsoever to go back to the Dursleys unless he was forced to. Harry, on the other hand, realized his mistake when Hermione mentioned home.

"Oh, I forgot about your parents! I'm sorry, Hermione... maybe we should leave this until we get back at the end of summer..."

"No, Harry! This is more important! We didn't even make it all the way through the summer last time! We have to do this now," she said firmly. "But maybe I can borrow Hedwig and owl my parents telling them I missed the train... and that we'll meet them some other way."

Harry pulled out his cloak and the map. "Well, Hermione. Shall we?"

It took them nearly an hour to get to the Owlery, send off the note, and sneak into the Room of Requirement. Obviously Professor McGonagall had noticed that Harry and Hermione's belongings were still unpacked when she checked Gryffindor Tower, and she had alerted the rest of staff. Not wanting to explain how they were sneaking around school and preparing to perform a blood ritual, they decided to be as cautious as possible and stayed under the cloak, using the map to take detours as much as possible.

Arriving at the hallway of the Room, they waited until nobody was nearby, and Hermione led the "summoning" of the room. I need a room to secretly etch blood runes into Harry's body for the next few hours without hurting him, she thought as specifically as possible, while walking past the blank wall three times. A tiny doorknob appeared in the stony wall, but no door appeared. Curious, she twisted the knob, and the camouflaged door opened up, and they both ran inside. The door sealed itself quickly behind them.

Inside, they found a room somewhat like an operating room. There was a large sink and shower at the back, along with dozens aprons, gloves, and other tools to ensure cleanliness. A soft, diffuse glow emanated from the entire ceiling so there were very few shadows. At the center of the room, there was a diverse set of knives, all

gleaming and perfectly clean, sitting on a tray beside an odd chair. The chair was slanted, cushioned, and had a face rest, much like a masseuse's chair, and was obviously made for Harry to comfortably rest face down. A large whiteboard was at the wall facing the table.

Hermione grinned, running over to the whiteboard, and began using her wand to quickly copy down all the notes she had on the procedure, along with a detailed diagram. Harry decided it he should shower while Hermione was preparing for the procedure. "No peeking!" he said, just as he stepped into the shower stall, pulling the curtain behind him. Hermione, who had been so focused on writing everything out, turned when she heard his voice. Her jaw dropped when she saw a pile of robes on the floor and Harry's bare shoulders sticking out of the curtain. Did he just strip in front of me? thought Hermione. I didn't think he had the nerve... and I MISSED IT! She nearly hyperventilated when she squeaked out, "Are you naked?"

Harry laughed from behind the shower curtain. "No, Hermione. I just took my robes and shirt off. I'm not going to completely strip down in front of you." She couldn't see it, but he was nearly doubled over in laughter. He had correctly guessed that Hermione would have seen the clues and let her mind go into overdrive. He tossed the rest of the clothes over the curtain and began to shower. After he was done, he opened the curtains a peek and grabbed the towels and his pants again, and half-dressed himself.

Hermione was waiting for him, all dressed up like a surgeon. She was taking great delight in playing doctor- in fact, her parents had wanted her to grow up to become one, at least until she found out she was a witch. The dream never quite died out, of course, as she realized she could pursue the best of both worlds as a magical healer. Harry sat down, and Hermione placed her hand on his shoulder before he lay against the face rest. "Harry... are you sure you want me to do this?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm just afraid that... I might hurt you... or mess up the procedure..."

"Hermione! Don't say that! I have complete faith in you. I know that you'll do this perfectly," said Harry. "Don't even think for a second

that you're hurting me. You could very well be saving my life with this."

His complete conviction to the task helped reassure Hermione. Harry leaned into the chair and Hermione began to copy the entire diagram carefully onto his back. When she was done, she picked up her wand and cast the most powerful numbing charm she could muster. "Vacuus Sensurus. This'll numb your back, Harry. It's not quite as effective as the numbing potion and it will wear off faster, so if you start feeling any pain at all, tell me to recast it, okay?" After a simple "okay" from Harry, she began to work. Tracing the lines she had already drawn with a sharp scalpel, she cut into Harry's flesh. Thankfully, he didn't twitch at all. "Did that hurt, Harry?"

"No, Hermione. You cast that charm perfectly, I barely felt it. Keep going."

Hermione smiled, slowly and carefully making short cuts with her knife, and cauterizing the wounds immediately to prevent bleeding and infection, and also to ensure that the runes would remain scarred into his back. Hermione nearly gagged at the smell of burning flesh, but pressed onwards. About halfway through, Harry signalled to her that the numbing charm was wearing off. She recast the charm, wondering what Harry's threshold of pain was, because it was longer than she thought her charm would have lasted. When she was finally complete, she wiped down Harry's back with a damp, warm towel.

"We're all done, Harry."

Harry gave her a hug. "Thank you, Hermione. Let's go back to the chamber." He was keeping his expression neutral as he put his shirt back on, and grabbed his invisibility cloak and his map. Hermione knew he was hiding something.

"Harry? Why do you want to go back there? Wait, shouldn't I get the runes too? I'll show you exactly what you need to do for the procedure..." she said.

"Oh... um... we can do that a bit later. There's something I left down in the chamber that I have to get." Harry was suspiciously avoiding Hermione's gaze, but she followed him back downstairs. Most of the

teachers seemed to have left the building already, deciding that they weren't inside. It made the trip back much quicker.

Upon their arrival, Hermione stopped Harry. She asked him, "What's this all about, Harry? What are we doing down here?"

"Err... before I answer, can you tell me if you have your sandstones here with you?" asked Harry, who was still staring at Hermione's feet.

"Yes, I kept a bunch of them in my satchel. Do you want to make another Return Cluster now, Harry?" Hermione was still trying to figure out what Harry was up to.

"You should get started on that, Hermione. I'll be right back." Harry jogged over to the huge basilisk corpse while Hermione removed her sandstones from her bag. She watched him, curious as to what he was doing. He heard him quietly mutter a spell, and, to her shock, he scraped his arm against one of the basilisk's fangs.

"HARRY!" She shrieked, running over to him as quickly as she could. "What are you doing? The venom in the basilisk is still potent after it's dead! What... why..."

He managed a weak smile, and answered with an apology. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I just knew you wouldn't let me go through with it if you knew what I was doing. But you did tell me this whole thing was untested, right? Well... I guess this is the first test."

Hermione ran up to him, and saw that he had cut a small gash on his own arm, and obviously dripped the venom directly into the wound. "Of course I would have stopped you, Harry! We could have found another way! We... we..."

"There wasn't any other way, was there, Hermione?" asked Harry. "I saw your diagram on the board... I've learned enough about runes this summer to at least figure out what it all meant. It only activates if I die." He was beginning to feel lethargic, and stumbled slightly. "I guess that was why it was 'untested,' wasn't it, Hermione? Well, if it doesn't work... you can just tell me right away before we go through all of this again."

Hermione knew he was right, but she didn't want to admit it. Supporting him under his arm, she helped him sit down in a more

comfortable position. "That didn't mean you had to go and do this, Harry! You stupid, reckless, fool of a boy..." She began to sob. "You just had to do this... to me... right after I decided..."

"Decided? What?" Harry looked up at her. The venom was burning through his arm and making its way through his body.

"I... I decided..." Hermione began. Oh god, he's dying right in front of me and I'm hesitating? I HAVE to tell him now, or else I'll never have the courage to... she reprimanded herself. "I decided that... after the World Cup... I would tell you that... I love you, Harry. And now you just had to poison yourself just before I had the chance to admit it." She began to cry openly.

"Oh... oh, no," said Harry, weakly. "I..."

Hermione drew a sharp breath between her sobs. Oh no, is that what he says? He... really does see me as just a friend, doesn't he? All those sweet things he did all summer... was just because he's my friend, and nothing else, she thought. Oh dear Merlin, it's the same thing I told Ginny... that's just Harry... he'd do that for any of his friends, wouldn't he? I'm not that special to him... and now I might have ruined the friendship. She could barely hear Harry continue to speak.

"...I've hurt you more than I thought, didn't I?" he whispered weakly. "I didn't know you cared for me that much, Hermione... or else... I would have admitted it to you... I love you, too, Hermione."

His last few words managed to capture Hermione's attention again. "What was that?" she asked, whirling back around so her face was inches from Harry's.

"I said... I love you too, Hermione. I'm sorry... I was stupid... I didn't realize that doing this would hurt you this much..." Harry's voice was getting weaker. Hermione's eyes widened as he said the words. "Hermione... will you be... my girlfriend?"

"You have to wait until you're dying to ask me that?" she shrieked. Burying her face into his shoulders again, she whispered to him, "Of course I will, you silly prat. I can't believe you asked now. What if this doesn't work?"

Harry closed his eyes, as he felt his eyelids getting too heavy. "Don't think about that, Hermione. If it does work... I'll remember... and we'll have all summer to enjoy it." He slumped down into a more comfortable position as his breathing became laboured. Hermione watched, cradling his head in her arm. Just after his breathing stopped, the runes on his back flashed. Giving his lifeless body one last hug, she began to carve her own Return Cluster in sandstone.

Harry awoke on Hermione's lap and saw a worried, but hopeful, look on her face. "Harry?" she asked softly. "Do you remember...?"

He smiled, reaching up around Hermione's head and pulling her closer, and said, "I love you, Hermione." He pulled her down, pressing their lips together gently. Hermione didn't resist at all, in fact, she pulled him in closer so that she could enjoy the feeling of his lips pressed against her own, while he relished the sensation of Hermione's caressing his own with her soft touch. After what must have been ages, but far too soon for both of them, they broke apart. Harry broke into a wide grin, and so did Hermione, but her face suddenly turned into a scowl. She slapped Harry in the cheek.

"Don't you dare do that to me again!" she huffed.

Harry was in shock. Didn't she just tell me that she loved me? I thought she enjoyed it too! It felt so right when we were kissing...

Hermione continued. "Do you know how long it took me to carve those runes with your dead body laying in front of me? Five hours, Harry! Every time I managed to finish one rune I'd look up, and then I'd cry because I was seeing in front of me exactly what could happen if I really did lose you, and then I'd have to calm myself down all over again. I had to redo four of the runes because my hand was shaking so much! Harry, you are such a prat!" She furiously gave him another slap, and just as quickly pulled him in and gave him another kiss. This one was powerful, angry, and passionate, and Harry didn't dare try to stop her.

She pulled back, and gave him another slap, albeit a much gentler one. "And that's for making me wake up with a bloody lip three times! I can't believe it took you until your fourth try to get it right and give me a proper kiss!"

"But... we weren't a couple the first few times, Hermione," Harry said meekly.

"Oh, shut up, Harry! I'm still mad at you!" she shouted, as she pushed in onto his back.

"Okay," Harry mouthed, barely making a sound. Hermione lay down on top of him and gave him another long, passionate kiss, tilting their heads every which way and moving their lips across each other's. When they finally finished, Hermione smiled, and said, "That one was for finally giving me a proper first kiss. Thank you, Harry." She got up, and pulled Harry up with her. "Alright, we've got to move quickly if my plan's going to work."

"Plan? What plan?" asked Harry.

"Oh, in between figuring out how to get back at you and waiting for you to wake up, I realized we had to move quickly to keep all this a secret. First off, for safety's sake, we need to redo the rune cluster on your back, and I need you to do one for me, too. We're going to miss the train."

"What? But how are we supposed to get home? And won't the staff be looking for us like last time?" asked Harry.

"Oh, that's easy. We'll have to pack our trunks, and I mean right now, to make it look like we're all set to leave. We'll put them in the chamber. By the time anyone notices we're not on the train, it'll be halfway to London already. I'll just send an owl to my parents telling me that I'll miss the train and I'll wait for them at the Leaky Cauldron instead of King's Cross. After we finish the carving, we just use one of the secret passages to sneak out of school, to Hogsmeade, and then floo from Three Broomsticks or something."

Harry furrowed his brow. "But... hm... the Dursleys wouldn't ever let me..."

Hermione gaped. "You don't actually want to stay with them, do you?" She blushed slightly. "I was hoping that I could convince my parents to let you stay over at my house this summer..."

Harry could barely contain his excitement. "You're saying you want me to spend all summer with you? Hermione!" He bounded over,

hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you! You... You have no idea how much this means to me, Hermione."

"I do," said Hermione. "That's why I'm doing it. Now let's go, it's just past nine and we probably have less than fifteen minutes to pack and hide our trunks back in the chamber."

They decided to send the letter to Hermione's parents first, so they wouldn't have to double back later, and also gave instructions to Hedwig to wait for them with the Grangers. They got to Gryffindor Tower at around 9:10, or with about 20 minutes to go. With another trip to the tower, Harry once again found Ron asleep on his bed. Is he really not going to wake up unless I do it for him? Harry thought. He was just about to douse Ron with another Aguamenti spell when he thought of something. If the professors are busy scrambling to get Ron out of the tower, maybe they won't notice me and Hermione missing. He decided to let Ron lie in bed as he quickly packed his trunk, then met Hermione once again in the Common Room.

"We should head down to the Great Hall, just so a few people see us at breakfast and know we're packed up and ready to go," said Hermione.

"Good idea," said Harry. "I left Ron in bed. He's still asleep."

Hermione looked at him and nearly burst out laughing. They made their way down to the Great Hall, just as most of the other students were walking out. They grabbed a bagel each, and began to follow the crowd. Just as they passed a convenient alcove, they ducked inside without anybody noticing and Harry threw his invisibility cloak around both of them. They waited for the last few stragglers before they moved out, making sure there was nobody who would notice two floating trunks with no owners, and made a dash for the second floor girls' bathroom.

"Who's there?" shouted Myrtle as they arrived. They didn't bother replying. Seeing nobody, Myrtle said, "Oh! Is it a new ghost? Did somebody else die? Don't worry, you can hang out here with me!"

Well, I did die, but I don't plan on spending an eternity with you, Myrtle, thought Harry. Maybe with Hermione, though, he added.

Leaving their trunks in the chamber, they watched the map until all the students, except for Ron, had left the school. The heads of houses were beginning their walk through their respective dormitories, and McGonagall was sure to find Ron any minute now. This was the perfect time for them to make their move up to the Room of Requirement.

Hermione made the request for the room again, except this time asking for a room where both of them could get blood runes etched. The only difference with this room was that it provided two shower stalls, separated by a large partition and separate changing areas for the two of them, and two sets of carving knives. Hermione decided to move the whiteboard so that it lay on the ground in front of the chair, so that Harry could read the diagram while she was etching the runes into his back.

Hermione did an excellent job explaining the technique for cutting the runes into their bodies. She was rather squeamish the first time, but was far more comfortable with the procedure the second time around and finished it much more quickly. Since most of the runes were identical to the ones used in their regular Return Cluster, Harry had little trouble understanding them and concentrated on the new runes, which provided the life-monitoring and charging functions, as well as a literal dead-man's switch which would release as soon as the life-monitoring runes failed.

When she was finished with Harry's runes, they both took showers and Hermione meekly kept herself covered until she sat down on the chair, facing away from Harry. As Harry drew the outlines on Hermione's back, he let his hand brush across her skin. Dear Merlin, Hermione's beautiful. How could I not realize it before?

Noticing his hesitation, Hermione asked, "Is s-something wrong, Harry?"

"No, nothing's wrong... It's just that... you're so beautiful, Hermione. I should have noticed before. Are you sure you want me to... carve these runes into your back?" he asked.

Hermione gulped. "You think I'm beautiful? Really? You're not just saying that, are you?"

"No, Hermione. I guess I never noticed before under all those robes, but seeing you lying down here in front of me, there's no way I can say you're anything less than gorgeous," he answered sincerely.

Hermione's heart suddenly beat twice as fast in excitement. Harry thought she was beautiful! Her, the little bookworm that everyone always made fun of for being nerdy and ugly, was gorgeous, according to Harry. All the insults that other children had teased her with over the years simply melted away in the face of the one person for which who truly mattered. She twisted around in the seat and gave him a quick kiss while hugging him. "Thank you, Harry! I... I'm glad you... don't think I'm ugly."

Harry suddenly stiffened, and his face grew very red. "I... uh... you're welcome, Hermione. I can't think of any part of you being ugly at all..." He couldn't help but let his eyes drop down. "...especially not your body..."

"Huh?" Hermione looked down, and just then remembered she was topless. "Eep!" she squeaked, turning red and jumping back down onto the chair. "Um... Harry... let's just finish this, alright?"

They finally completed the procedure by late afternoon. They both washed up, got dressed and checked the map. It seemed like nobody had noticed they were missing. Most of the professors seemed to have left the castle, presumably back home, and the rest were in their offices or the staff room. They retrieved their trunks from the Chamber of Secrets, and then took the secret passage through the one-eyed witch to Hogsmeade. They were both excited to spend the rest of summer together and chatted during the entire walk. Madam Rosmerta was glad to lend them some Floo powder when they made an excuse about missing the train, and Hermione stepped into the fires first. It was only after Harry leapt into the flames that he realized he would be meeting with his girlfriend's parents, and all that would entail...

Author's Chapter End notes:

- this was one of my one-shot ideas, where I was trying to figure out how to throw in a "Declaration of love while they died a slow death" scene and still have the story continue.

Chapter 8: Summer with Grangers

As Harry tumbled out of the fireplace, he thought of the importance of first impressions. As he lay on the floor covered in soot in a messy heap, he thought the first impressions the Grangers would have of him would not be good. He prayed that they hadn't noticed him like this, but those hopes were dashed when he heard Hermione's voice. "Mum, Dad, I'd like you to meet Harry Potter!"

Mrs. Granger seemed to be amused, while Mr. Granger was apparently having some reservations. Quickly getting up, Harry dusted himself off and held out his hand. Don't act nervous, he said to himself. Stay calm, be confident... "Hello Mrs. Granger, Mr. Granger," he said in a flat monotone as he shook their hands. He knew he was utterly failing to impress Hermione's parents. To his surprise, Hedwig flew in at that moment to land on his shoulder. She hooted in greeting.

"So you're the one that owns this beautiful snowy owl," said Mrs. Granger. "She's remarkably intelligent, you know. My name's Emma, and this is Dan. Don't be afraid, we won't bite." She gave a welcoming smile. "Hermione's mentioned to us in her letters that there always seems to be a lot of excitement surrounding you. Would you care to explain?"

Harry looked at Hermione, who was standing behind her parents, shaking her head furiously. He looked back at Emma, and said, "Um... well, you see... I play Quidditch. I'm the seeker on the house team. It's the position that gets the most attention... so... um, things kind of get hectic around me." Hermione was nodding in approval in the background.

Dan Granger became a bit more interested with this. "Oh, it's a sport then? How often do you practice? And are you any good?" He was a bit more gruff when asking his questions, almost like it were an interrogation.

"Dan! Don't be so rough on the boy!" exclaimed Emma. "Sorry, but he's quite protective of our dear little Hermione." He's not the only one, thought Harry.

"I'm not little any more, mum!" Hermione complained.

"You'll always be our little Hermione as long as we live," said Emma, smiling.

While the two women were having their little argument, Harry decided that it was the best time to get on Mr. Granger's good side. "Well, to answer your questions, sir, um... Yes, Quidditch is the main sport for wizards. The practices change depending on the school schedules, but Captain Wood gets us out on the field about four times a week. And... well, I don't mean to brag, but I've only lost one game out of all the ones I've played so far. Our team won the Quidditch cup this year." Harry relaxed a bit, now that they were talking about a subject he could be rather confident about. Hedwig noted his tension fade and decided to be a little friendlier, as well. She nipped his ear, as if asking for an owl treat. Harry looked at her, and said, "Later, Hedwig! I'll buy you the freshest ones from Eeylops, alright?"

"Oh, don't be so modest, Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, hopping over to his side. "He's the youngest seeker Hogwarts has ever had in a century! In fact, he's still the youngest player out of all the teams at Hogwarts!" she said, rather proudly.

"It looks like our Hermione has found herself quite an accomplished young man, hasn't she?" Emma whispered to her husband. Dan simply whispered back, "We'll see. He'd better not just be some jock type who's playing with her feelings."

Hermione led the way out of the Leaky Cauldron, and said to her parents, "Mom! Dad! Harry and I need to stop off at the bookstore to grab some textbooks before we head home... Is that alright?"

"Oh, we'll have to stop off at both the normal and the wizard banks, then. We didn't bring much cash with us..." said Emma.

"Don't inconvenience yourself, Mrs. Granger," said Harry. "I can just take some gold out of my account."

Dan replied, "Harry, we can't have you buying things for our daughter..." He was still looking at Harry questioningly.

"Oh, that's not it, Mr. Granger. The textbooks are for both of us. Hermione and I wanted to learn some more about things that the school doesn't teach, so we're going to study ourselves over the

summer. It's as much for me as it is for her. My parents left me my trust account for my schooling, so it'll be fine." Harry explained. To be honest, he really wanted to get in their good graces as quickly as possible, and saw this as a way to do it.

"Well, Harry, just make sure you don't spend too much of your money. You need to have a budget, to take care of your finances," said Emma. "Textbooks aren't cheap. We don't want you to have to explain to your parents why you suddenly spent a good chunk of the money they're giving you."

Harry paused, wondering how he was going to explain his parenting situation. Hermione was giving him an apologetic look- it seemed she hadn't told her parents, and wasn't expecting the subject to come up, at least not in this manner. "Umm... I'll tell you about my parents later," said Harry. They made their way to Gringotts, and Harry told Hedwig to wait for him outside Eeylops. She took off when they stepped inside the bank. Dan and Emma followed Harry as he walked up to the counter.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal, please."

The goblin didn't bother looking up. "Name and vault?"

"Harry Potter. My vault number is... um... 687. Here's the key."

"Would you like to visit your vault or shall I make the withdrawal for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked back at the Grangers. He remembered how uncomfortable the Weasleys were when they saw his vault, which was stacked with Galleons. Then again, the Grangers were both dentists, and were pretty well-off, but he wasn't trying to flaunt his wealth to them. He just needed a modest amount of money to get some books. "We'll wait here. I only need about fifty Galleons or so for today."

"Very well, Mr. Potter." The goblin took his key, and quickly left for the mine-carts. As he was watching the goblin hurry away, Harry got the feeling that he was being stared at. He turned around slowly. Hermione's parents were gaping at him.

"Harry, dear," Emma said slowly, with a look of concern on her face. "You did just withdraw fifty Galleons, didn't you? Not Sickles?"

Harry nodded. "Um... did I do something wrong?"

Emma hesitated. "Well, Harry, remember what I said about finances? How you should look after your money and make sure you don't spend too much of it too quickly?"

Harry nodded again. "Er... yes... I'm not taking too much out, am I? I've still got a lot more in my vault. I just wanted to make sure we had enough so we wouldn't have to come back again when we bought our books. I've never really learned much about money, but I'm careful to make sure I don't run out any time soon."

Emma stared at him. He seemed sincere about what he said. Turning back to her husband, she whispered to him, "What was the exchange rate again, Dan?"

Dan, still looking at Harry, said, "Just over 100 pounds to the galleon, I think. Did that kid just withdraw £ 5000 for textbooks?"

"He did say he knew he had a lot more. He didn't consider it very much money." Turning back to Harry, Emma said, "Harry, when that goblin gets back, perhaps you should ask him for a bank record? Perhaps a statement of your current accounts?"

Harry nodded. Clearly Hermione's parents were agitated by his actions, and he didn't want to do anything to upset them. After a few more minutes, the goblin returned with a sack of gold.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter. Is there anything else I can do for you today?"

"Err... yes, I'd like a statement of my current holdings."

"Very well, Mr. Potter. There is a transaction fee of one sickle for written copy of your current vault holdings, verified and authenticated by Gringotts of London. I'll need a drop of your blood."

"Yes, that will be fine," Harry replied. The goblin pricked his finger with a small needle and held it there until it turned bright red. When he withdrew the needle, Harry's finger didn't bleed. Two minutes

later the goblin with two scrolls of parchment. Thanking the goblin, which elicited a small look of surprise, Harry and the Grangers sat down in the lobby. He unrolled the first parchment.

Vault 687: Trust Vault, Harry Potter

Restrictions: No more than 20% of the Vault's total holdings or 5,000 Galleons may be withdrawn per year, whichever is lesser. Any withdrawal over 500 Galleons must be approved by the current guardian of Harry Potter.

Current Balance: 40,246 Galleons, 13 Sickles, 20 Knuts

Interest: Variable based on Gringotts Investments, Cautious growth.

Recent transactions

Withdrawal: 1 Sickle

Withdrawal: 50 Galleons, 2 Knuts [Transaction fee: 2 Knuts]

Deposit: 169 Galleons, 14 Sickles, 2 Knuts [Interest]

Deposit: 167 Galleons, 16 Sickles, 4 Knuts [Interest]

Deposit: 166 Galleons, 8 Sickles, 19 Knuts [Interest]

All the Grangers gaped. Hermione was staring at the statement. Doing some quick addition in her head, she said to Harry in awe, "You're earning about 2,000 Galleons a year on your account in interest alone, Harry."

Harry looked back at her. "Um... wait... so that means withdrawing 50 galleons isn't a problem, right?"

Emma was rubbing her temples, while Dan was still staring at the statement mumbling to himself. "Harry... well, I have to agree that's not an issue any more. Maybe we should talk about your finances later, when we get home, alright?"

Harry looked up at her and said, "Alright, Mrs. Granger. Thanks for taking the time to teach me these things. I never really had a chance

to learn it from anyone. I just want to see what's written on this second scroll before we go." He unfurled the other scroll.

Vault 39: Potter Family Vault

Restrictions: May only be accessed by Head of House Potter when he is of age.

Current Balance: 4,163,846 Galleons, 11 Sickles, 10 Knuts

Interest: Variable based on Gringotts Investments, Aggressive growth

Recent transactions

Deposit: 37,760 Galleons, 4 Sickles, 22 Knuts [Interest]

Deposit: 25,246 Galleons, 2 Sickles, 3 Knuts [Interest]

Depost: 40,465 Galleons, 10 Sickles, 6 Knuts [Interest]

The list continued. Emma nearly fainted. Dan suddenly seemed to be looking at him with greater approval. Hermione was hyperventilating. "Four... maybe five hundred thousand Galleons in interest per year... Oh my god, Harry, I had no idea you were this rich."

Harry fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well, let's just get the textbooks and we can discuss this back at home." Hermione nodded in agreement, and dragged her shocked parents out of the bank. Harry followed closely behind.

They made their way to Flourish & Blott's, where Hermione expertly navigated the huge stacks of books around the store. She practically dove into a large, old stack of books at the back of the store, rummaging around for several minutes before coming up with several books: Mild Mental Meditations, Safely Stowing Secrets: Locking Your Mind, and Intruder Beware: Mental Snares. "These are books to help us learn Occlumency, Harry." She shoved them into his arms, and quickly ran back to another stack of books. After another few minutes, she had picked out Trust and Truth: Know Your Enemies and Detecting Deceit. "And these ones are for Legilimency." She stacked them on top of the ones Harry was already holding, and then rushed off to another part of the store. She

was much quicker this time, as this section was neatly organized into shelves. She pulled out *Your Inner Animal: The Path to the Animagus* and *Bring out the Beast*. "And we can learn to be Animagi as well! These were the books that Sirius recommended. Is there anything else?"

Harry didn't quite want to carry many more books, but he did have one thing he wanted to read over the summer. "Are there any good books on duelling, Hermione?" So far, in every fight, he had been relying purely on instinct. He knew he would have to actually know what he was doing, even if he couldn't actually practice during the summer.

"Oh, of course!" Once again, Hermione was off like a shot to another corner of the store, and returned with *The Dueller's Arsenal I: Fundamentals of Fighting* and *The Dueller's Arsenal II: Speedy Spellcasting and Cunning Combinations*. "That should be enough reading for summer, right, Harry?"

Harry was nearly losing his balance with the stack of texts, and his arms were getting very tired. How did Hermione do this? Lightening charms? But if she had been like this even before discovering she was a witch... well, that explained where she got her exercise. They made their way to the front counter, where Mr. Blotts eyed them curiously while ringing up the books. "Four Galleons and ten Sickles, please." Harry paid for them all, and Hermione shoved the books into Harry's trunk, since hers was full of books already.

After they were done, they went over to Eeylops, where Hedwig was waiting for them. Harry ran inside to quickly buy some owl treats, as well as some owl care products like feather wash and a talon file. He immediately gave Hedwig a handful of treats when he got back outside. He asked Hedwig, "Would you rather ride with us in the car, or fly to Hermione's house on your own?" With a dignified hoot in response, Hedwig took off.

Upon exiting Diagon Alley, Hermione's parents led the way to their car, which was a fairly large, comfortable Mercedes. Harry and Hermione jumped into the back seat. Feeling tired from their day of endless activity, they were already asleep before they even left London.

Upon their arrival in Southampton, Mrs. Granger smiled at the pair. The two of them seemed to have gravitated towards each other in their sleep and were leaning across the center seat. Hermione's head was resting on Harry's shoulder. "Dan! Look at this! Aren't they simply adorable?"

Dan Granger would have agreed if, say, Harry was his own son. But Harry wasn't. Harry was a boy his dear little Hermione had brought back home with her. He was a boy she seemed to enjoy holding hands with very much- and he seemed to enjoy it just as much. He couldn't let himself agree that they did, in fact, look absolutely adorable, or else he'd be going easy on Harry, and he certainly couldn't do that.

"Don't wake them... let me get the camera first!" whispered Emma. She dashed into the house, bringing back the camera and clambered quietly into the front seat of the car. Holding the camera right in front of the two children, she snapped a perfect photo. The flash woke the two of them up.

"Mum! What did you do that for?" Hermione cried.

"You two looked so cute! I couldn't resist. I'm adding this one to the photo album for sure." Emma grinned and ran back into the house. Hermione chased after her, leaving Harry staring at Dan.

"Come on, Harry, let's move these trunks inside," said Dan. Harry obediently grabbed the trunks and unloaded them from the car. Dan took Hermione's in, while Harry dragged his own towards the house. Looking around, he could tell he was in a much more affluent neighbourhood than the Dursleys'. The houses were much larger and many of them had well-trimmed hedges surrounding the yards. As he walked up to the front door, he noticed that the Grangers also kept their lawn neatly trimmed and weed-free. Hermione greeted Harry right when he stepped inside.

"Harry! Follow me! I'll show you around!" Hermione led Harry around her house, first pointing out the need-to-know rooms: bathrooms, kitchen, dining room, and the guest room where he would be staying. Right across the hall was Hermione's room. She seemed a little hesitant to show Harry inside, but relented when he gave his promise not to laugh. Harry was unsure of what she could be embarrassed about. As expected, inside her room was her bed, a

large desk, several bookshelves full of books, a large, padded basket for Crookshanks to sleep in, and... teddy bears?

Harry was somewhat surprised and relieved to see Hermione's girly side express itself in her room. I wonder if she likes hugging her teddy bears a lot, Harry speculated. Maybe that's why she likes giving hugs so much. He grinned at Hermione. "That's a nice collection of teddy bears you've got there."

Hermione put her hands on her hips, and said with some annoyance, "Harry! You promised you wouldn't laugh!"

Harry replied with a perfectly straight face, "I'm not laughing, Hermione! I like this side of you. I think it's... cute."

"You... do? Really?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you let me know you better, Hermione. It means a lot to me. Can I... hold one of your bears?"

Hermione boggled at the idea of a teenage boy wanting to play with one of her teddy bears. "Um... sure, Harry... but why?"

"Well... I heard a lot about them, but I never had one when I was growing up, so I just wanted to know what it feels like to hold one of them," Harry answered, rather embarrassed.

Hermione suddenly remembered Harry's neglected childhood and felt the sorrow well up inside of her. She grabbed a big, furry, brown, and slightly worn teddy bear off the head of her bed and gave it to Harry. "Here, Harry. Take Mr. Fuzzybum. He's been my favourite bear ever since I was little. Give him a hug."

Harry gave Mr. Fuzzybum a tight squeeze. The soft, warm fabric of the bear made him very comfortable and relaxed. "I like him, Hermione. He smells like you," said Harry. He didn't notice Hermione blush, as he had closed his eyes to enjoy the sensations the teddy bear was giving him all the more.

Hermione saw how relaxed Harry was when he hugged the bear. In some ways, he was a little childish- no, that wasn't right. He was making up for the childhood he never had. Hermione stepped behind him and squeezed Harry and Mr. Fuzzybum in a tight hug.

She gave Harry a quick kiss on the cheek and said to him, "Why don't you sleep with him tonight, Harry? It'll be the closest thing to being with me..." she suggested.

Harry tilted his head back and looked at Hermione. "I... umm... are you sure? I mean..."

"Just say yes, Harry."

"Yes. Thank you, Hermione."

That night, Harry dreamed the most beautiful dreams he ever had. With Hermione's aroma filling every breath, and the teddy bear's fur tickling his skin the way Hermione's hair did, he could honestly say he had never had a happier night's rest.

The next day, the entire family had gathered in the living room. They went over house rules, schedules, and outlined daily chores for the two kids. Harry was rather surprised at the extremely small, and simple, list of chores he had to do compared to what went on at the Dursleys. He could easily finish all of them in less than an hour. At the end of the meeting, however, Emma brought up an unfortunate subject. "Harry, why don't you give your parents a phone call to let them know you're doing alright here?"

Harry drew a sharp breath. Hermione placed her hand on his lap to reassure him. She leaned over and whispered, "I think you should tell them. Don't be afraid, Harry."

Harry nodded, and said, "Um... Well, my parents died when I was a baby... I've been living with my Aunt and Uncle."

Emma gasped, and quickly knelt down in front of Harry. "I'm sorry, Harry. I had no idea!"

Dan, however, furrowed his brow, noticing Harry's attitude change. He seemed to have come to terms with his parents' death long ago... that wasn't the real issue here. He crossed his arms, and asked, "You don't want us to contact them, do you? Are you running away from home?"

Hermione jumped to his defense. "Dad! They're horrible people! They treat Harry like a slave around the house, and they hate him just because he's a wizard! You can't possibly make him go back there!"

Dan had rarely ever seen Hermione become so passionate about anything. In fact, she was always a good girl, following the rules, respecting her elders- but the letter she wrote to them said that Harry had permission to stay over for the summer. For the first time in his memory, Hermione had lied to them. So why did it have to be for the sake of a boy? he thought, sighing. "I'm sorry, honey. They're his legal guardians. They need to know where he is. In fact, they could be calling the police and filing a missing-child report."

Harry almost laughed at that. "I doubt it. They'll be glad I'm gone... the only thing they'll miss about me is that I won't be doing all the work around the house."

Dan was still trying to figure out Harry. He couldn't be running away from home just because of some chores, he thought. Heck, he seemed relieved when we gave him the list of summer chores to do. Hermione says he works pretty hard at school, too. We'll have to get to the bottom of this. He asked Harry, "Well, I'll still have to talk to them. What's the phone number?"

Harry said, meekly, "Um... I don't know." Seeing the doubt in Dan's eyes, he continued. "They never let me use the telephone, and they told me they didn't want to be bothered by me when I was out of the house, so they never let me know the phone number." He could tell that Dan was shocked at the information, but still held some doubt, thinking it might have been a lie to avoid letting him call the Dursleys. Harry told Dan what he knew. "I don't know the whole mailing address, but they live at Number 4, Privet Drive, in Little Whinging, Surrey. Oh, and they're the Dursleys. My uncle is Vernon Dursley."

Dan seemed satisfied with that answer. "I can look up his number with that information. I think I'll make the call now." When he finally found the number, the rest of them listened in to the conversation.

"Hello? My name is Daniel Granger, could I speak to Mr. Dursley please? Yes... mhm... Mr. Dursley, I'm calling to tell you that a boy by the name of Harry Potter is staying over... what did you just call him? No, I don't... my daughter, yes. WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY? If

you DARE speak like that to me or my family again, I swear..." He looked at the receiver, then turned around and saw everyone staring at him. "Well, that was easily the most unpleasant man I've ever had the misfortune of talking to. Harry, I'm sorry for doubting you, but you're welcome to stay at our house this summer."

Harry and Hermione both cheered and hugged each other. They never guessed it would have been so easy to get the parents' permission.

They spent most of their days studying together, cuddled in each other's arms while Hermione's parents were at work. As soon as they heard a car pull up, however, they would break apart instantly, and they just acted like good friends for the rest of the day. Neither was sure whether or not the parents suspected, but they had a feeling the jig would be up eventually- possibly before summer ended.

Aside from their magical studies, Hermione took the time to help educate Harry on Muggle science. Not too surprisingly, she had already completed her high school education last summer, so she tutored Harry with what she knew- and she knew quite a bit. Harry was in awe, but then again, she had only found out about the magical world when she turned eleven, and then came to school already knowing more about casting spells than most of the pure-blooded first years.

They decided on a schedule for the rest of summer with mornings spent on scientific education, and the afternoons were spent on magical.

On the magical side, they began with one of the Legilimency texts. Since it was a wandless type of magic, they could practice it over the summer without getting any annoying owls from the Ministry. At first, they were both hesitant to invade each other's mental privacy, but they also both agreed that the skill was necessary to further develop each other's Occlumency as well, and they both trusted each other enough that they knew they wouldn't use anything they saw against each other. Hermione, being the quicker learner of the two, decided to dive into Harry's mind first. Harry focused on his image of the empty sky while looking straight into Hermione's eyes.

"Legilimens," whispered Hermione. Harry immediately felt a presence, but after a few seconds, she quickly stopped, losing her balance.

"Hermione! What's wrong?" asked Harry, as he cradled her.

"Um... you know I'm afraid of heights... and I just wasn't prepared to be so high up when I entered your mind..." said Hermione sheepishly. "Let me try again. Legilimens," she repeated.

This time, Harry could sense something poking from below the clouds. "Hermione?" he asked. "Is that you?"

"Err... I think so," said Hermione. "Let's test this out. Um... try to hide your memory of our first kiss."

"Wait, which first kiss?" asked Harry. Unfortunately, the very mention of the act brought the memories to the forefront of his mind. Hermione saw each one of the times he had accidentally "kissed" her along with the one he gave after his "test" of the blood runes.

"Harry! I told you those two didn't count!" she shouted. She paused, and then added, "...and you need more work on keeping your memories hidden, too."

Harry decided to return the favour. When he entered Hermione's mind, all he saw was darkness. "Wow, Hermione. What is this?"

"It's the deep sea. I got the idea from some documentaries. No sunlight can reach this depth so it's pretty much pitch black."

"You're going to have to show that to me sometime. Now, try to hide your memory of the sunset above the Burrow." He smirked, knowing Hermione really treasured that memory.

Just like Harry, Hermione failed to not think about it the moment he said it. Harry caught glimpses of her perspective, and her emotions, during the lessons. "Looks like you need to work on your shields, too, Hermione." He grinned. "Oh... I had no idea you enjoyed them that much, love. I promise, I'll give you more 'lessons' when we get back to school, alright?" Hermione blushed, and bit her lower lip seductively. She made him seal his promise with a kiss.

The occlumency textbooks were extremely helpful. They could only do so much on their own, and the books suggested things neither one thought of before. They learned a few new meditation techniques, and experimented for a few weeks to see which ones worked best for each of them. Hermione really enjoyed doing her meditation while relaxing in the bath, and was now prone to taking much longer each night to wash up than before. Harry tried out a sensory deprivation exercise and found it worked extremely well for him.

The next two textbooks both suggested imagining powerful, but simple, defences to shield their memories. Ideally, it had to be unbreakable, without being complex. The second one suggested something more devious, in placing a decoy fortress within their mindscape, which stored trivial memories, so an attacker would waste a lot of time attempting to break their defences and receive nothing in return.

A few weeks later, just before Harry's birthday, they had their basic schemes set up. Neither one really had any good defences, as it still took a lot of concentration keeping their memories divided into two locations within their minds. Once again, Hermione entered Harry's mind first to take a look around.

"Well, this seems a little cliché. A flying castle?" asked Hermione.

"I got the idea from the cover of one of your books, Hermione," retorted Harry.

"You didn't have to make it shaped like Hogwarts, though," she said. "You might be familiar with Hogwarts, but so are the thousands of other people who had years of schooling there."

"Alright, I'll change it. Maybe I'll make it a UFO or something and fill it with little green men." said Harry.

"Oh, I'd like to see Professor Snape try to take on some Martians. This is your decoy fortress though, isn't it? I can't seem to find your real one... come on, give me a hint, Harry," Hermione said, rather frustrated.

"Go up," was all he said.

"What? There's nothing up higher than your flying castle up here... not even any clouds. It's just the sky, and... Ohhh, I get it," she smiled. "You're hiding your memories in the sun? That's great, Harry. It's always there, but nobody ever really notices it..."

"I'm glad you approve. Now it's my turn," he said.

Entering Hermione's mind, he saw exactly the same thing as he did before- complete blackness. "Uh... a little help?" he asked.

"You're just going to have to feel your way around with your other senses," Hermione said, smirking.

Harry "felt" his way around Hermione's mindscape until he sensed something moving in the water. He chased after it for several minutes, only to come across an enormous squid, tentacles poised to strike at him. "Gah!" he cried. "You're making me work this hard for your decoy memories? This is your decoy, isn't it?"

Hermione grinned. "Yup. I'll give you a hint for my real ones, though. It's the opposite of what you did."

Harry thought for a moment, and then plunged downwards. Deeper and deeper he went, until finally, he hit the seafloor, which was solid. In fact, it was much more solid than, well, dirt or rock should have been. Harry laughed. "Wait... you're telling me that your mindscape is one of the deepest parts of the ocean, but you still bury your memories under the ground?"

"Well, it's not that obvious, is it?" retorted Hermione. "Actually, it's much deeper than that. You remember our geology lessons, right? I decided to stick my memories under a lot of magma. I figured Wizards would never really know enough about the Earth's crust and inner layers to figure out how deep down they have to go. Where did you get the idea for the Sun?"

"You taught it to me. I also kind of figured wizards don't know much about the sun, either. Muggle astronomy seems to be so much more advanced than Wizarding astronomy, although all the horoscopes are completely inaccurate..."

They both laughed, realizing how incorporating muggle sciences could help make their magic that much stronger.

They continued with their animagus training after they had established a stronger foundation in occlumency. They realized that, technically, Sirius hadn't sent Harry his birthday gift yet this time around. They pored over the two animagus books for the week leading up to Harry's birthday, combining some of the meditation exercises with their occlumency meditation. Harry was having an easier time feeling his instincts- throughout most of their adventures over the years, Harry had been running on emotions, whereas Hermione always seemed to manage to keep a level head, which was apparently hindering her progress. She was already skilled at controlling her emotions before occlumency, but the problem was with letting go of that control.

One of the books suggested that they associate a memory or a situation with a very basic, animalistic feeling. Simple joy, sadness, aggression, fear. Harry knew what brought the most joy in his life right now- it was Hermione. Seeing her smile, making her smile, giving her kisses and hugs, or simply being near her while they sat silently and studied. He could feel happiness and love right down to his very core when he thought of her. But sadness? What made him really sad? The Dursleys? Maybe years ago, but he knew now he only had to deal with them for two months out of the year. It was more frustration than sadness now. His mind floated over to the time when he was dying of Basilisk poison, and Hermione in tears in front of him. She was incredibly fearful, angry, and sad... and it made him sad, as well. He never wanted to see her like that again. Even worse, he was the one that caused that anguish in her. He never wanted to do that to her again. What about fear? And anger? He realized he was feeling both at the same time the night of the World Cup, seeing Hermione unconscious, he feared for her life, and he wanted to utterly destroy the ones who had done that to her. Hermione. All of his deepest, innermost feelings, revolved around her, he suddenly realized.

"Ummm... Harry?" Hermione held his face with both hands on his cheeks. "What are you doing?"

"Huh?" Harry opened his eyes, and realized he was leaning on Hermione. "What? What was I doing?"

"You were... um... rubbing your cheeks against me," said Hermione. "Not that I didn't enjoy it, you know. But it just seemed to come out

of nowhere. And I think you were sniffing, too. You might have been about to nibble on me."

"Oh!" Harry exclaimed. "I... uh... um... well, I think I found the key to my animagus meditation. Or maybe I didn't, but I discovered something important, anyways."

"Really?" asked Hermione excitedly. "Did you discover your form? Can you tell me what it is? How did you do it?"

"Oh... no, I didn't discover my form. I... uh... discovered you, Hermione," Harry said, timidly.

"Me? You discovered me? What do you mean by that?"

"Well... I discovered that... all my deepest emotions... happiness, sadness, anger, fear... they all revolve around you, Hermione. You make me happy, and I'm sad if you're unhappy, I get angry when others try to hurt you, and I'm afraid... of losing you. I feel everything more strongly when it involves you," he said.

Hermione squealed, tackling Harry to the floor again. "Oh, Harry! You have no idea how romantic you just were, do you? I'm going to have to think of you myself... after I finish snogging you silly, that is."

On Harry's birthday, he received very nearly the same letters as he did last time around- except Ron wasn't quite as friendly, and just sent his usual box of chocolate frogs instead of the Quidditch statistics book. Hermione and her parents took him out to a restaurant and had celebrated with cheesecake. Knowing that Harry had already finished reading the curse-breaker book she gave him his last birthday around, she bought him *The World's Wildest Wards* this time around, detailing some of the most intricate and advanced warding schemes, both modern and ancient. Sadly to say, the most advanced warding schemes were also the least detailed, because the owners didn't want to give up many of their secrets to the authors. It was still a very interesting and inspiring read, and Harry nearly thanked Hermione with a kiss until he remembered they were in front of her parents, and he settled on a hug.

That evening, he was hit with a vision of Voldemort once again- being better prepared for it, he focused on remembering the ritual Voldemort was performing, the markings on the ground, the smell of

the potions. He could glean very little more information, though. It seemed that Voldemort had finished the preparations before the vision began, and didn't spend much more time looking at it. Afterwards, he still sent word to Dumbledore, but received the same unhelpful reply.

The rest of summer passed by without much fanfare. They exchanged a few letters with Ron that summer, who seemed rather miffed that Harry hadn't woken him up in time to pack, but Harry decided to mention that Neville, Dean, and Seamus had all tried to wake him, too. Ron, apparently had to Floo home from McGonagall's office, so he never noticed they weren't on the train, either. Ron was just as excited as before to invite them over to the World Cup, and Harry and Hermione debated whether or not they should go. They knew there was going to be an attack, but Harry also knew that Cedric didn't seem to be destined to suffer any harm, and nor would the Weasleys, in the attack. They turned down the invitation, which, according to the twins' letter a few days later, left him catatonic for at least twelve hours as he couldn't comprehend anyone who would turn down free tickets to the World Cup.

Instead, Harry decided to thank the Grangers for having him over the summer by treating them to dinner at an expensive waterfront restaurant with a fantastic view. They were reluctant to have him pay, but Harry insisted, especially since he knew he was filthy rich and the Grangers were some of the nicest people he had ever met in his life, and he just had to thank them for their hospitality. When they got home, Harry surprised them with an owl. It was a long-eared owl of moderate size, strong enough to handle small parcels as well as letters. "Her name is Kerris. I've also bought you a year's worth of food, treats, an indoor stand and outdoor stand, and a cage for transportation. Now you can send letters to Hermione whenever you want!"

For the first time all summer, both Dan and Emma hugged Harry.

The day before they were to leave for London, Dan and Emma were talking in hushed whispers down the hall to Hermione's room.

"We should do it now, Dan."

"What? What makes you think she's going to... I mean, she's a smart girl, and she's only fourteen!"

"Nearly fifteen, Dan. And a lot can happen in a year. You saw how close they were already this summer. In fact, they were probably hiding a lot more from us."

Dan's eyes widened. He was always protective of Hermione, but the idea of her trying to deceive him was new. "You're right. In fact, they live in the same dormitory at school, don't they?" He sighed. "Do you want to do it, or should I?"

"I'll do it, Dan. The two of us can have a little girl-chat afterwards, as well. Maybe I can get some more details about Harry, too."

Emma walked down the hall and knocked on Hermione's door. "Hermione? Can I come in?"

"Sure, come on in, mum."

Hermione was, as usual, meditating while sitting on her bed, like she did every night. Emma walked in and sat down beside her.

"Hermione, I want to talk to you about... um... your relationship with Harry."

Hermione opened her eyes. "You like him, don't you? He's such a great friend..." she began.

"Oh, no, no, honey. It's not that we... disapprove. It's... well, we're worried that you'll be gone all year, and... that your relationship will develop further. We want to make sure you know what you could be getting into..." she tried to explain it slowly.

"Oh, you mean sex? Don't worry, mum. Harry won't push me that quickly. We both love each other and he'd never try to push me further than I'm comfortable," Hermione was grinning mischievously.

Emma was taken aback. "Oh... alright, so I don't have to explain about that... I'm glad you two can trust each other. When did you learn about it? Anyways... um... if you do, you still need to make sure you're using protection..." she continued.

"I learned this stuff when I finished Biology last summer, mum. And don't worry about STDs or pregnancy. There's several spells that protect against disease and pregnancy, and they're all more reliable than condoms or birth control pills. I've already got my Hep A and B shots when I was in school. I actually got my HPV vaccine at the doctor this summer, too. And after all that, magical potions can cure nearly everything short of AIDS. They might have a cure for that too, I'll have to look it up."

"Oh... well then... thank you honey. What's the HPV vaccine, by the way?"

"It's a new vaccine, it helps against the Human papillomavirus, which can cause cervical cancer. It's good for younger girls to get it."

"Oh... thank you, honey. That was most informative." Emma walked out of the room, shaking her head. Weren't the education supposed to go the other way around?

Author's Chapter End notes:

- I know the HPV vaccine didn't come out in 1994, it's actually a very recent development, came out in 2006 i think. Still, I think people (especially teenage girls) should know about it and get it. Why not have useful information in a fanfic, after all?

Chapter 9: Back to Hogwarts

On September 1st, they packed their trunks into the car early in the day and drove into London. They wanted to be earlier than usual so they could have a nice, casual brunch near King's Cross right before boarding the train. When they finished, they gave their goodbye hugs before crossing the barrier into Platform 9³/₄.

Inside, they were expecting to see a crowd of red hair somewhere on the platform. They searched around for several minutes until they heard a familiar, commanding voice come from behind them. "Come on, boys. Fred, George, if I hear about a single one of your 'candies' at Hogwarts, you can bet you'll be hearing from me! Ron, stop dallying already, we're nearly about to miss the train! Ginny, do be a dear and hold on to Pig, will you?" They turned around to see Molly Weasley was ushering the family onto the platform.

"Hi, everyone!" Both of them greeted the Weasleys cheerfully, glad to see none of them were hurt in the World Cup attack. Ron, finally noticing Harry, rushed up to him.

"Harry, mate! You won't believe what happened at the game! I don't know if you heard, but..." Harry and Hermione braced themselves for the news of the attack. "...Krum caught the snitch, but they still lost! Ireland's chasers were amazing!"

Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, and George all gaped at him. "Only our ickle Ronnikins..." began George.

"...could talk about the game..." continued Fred.

"even after a Death Eater attack," the twins finished together.

"Well, it's not like anybody got hurt," Ron grumbled. "We didn't even see any of them. People screamed and we were already two steps away from the emergency Portkey station."

"We thought Harry might be a little more interested in a story that he couldn't just read off of the Daily Prophet," said George.

"What are you two talking about? The attack was reported in the paper, wasn't it?" asked Ron, somewhat unsure as he never did read the newspaper voluntarily.

"Ah, but not a first-hand tale..."

"...of fear, horror..."

"...excitement, bravery..."

"...and a death-defying escape from a Death Eater attack!" they cried with a flourish.

"I just said that nothing like that happened!" Ron was clearly getting riled by the twins' antics.

"That's why we called it a story, Ron," said George, rolling his eyes.

"Little Ronnie here never had an appreciation for the finer arts," Fred whispered loudly. Harry and Hermione, who had a very good idea of what happened, laughed as they all boarded the train.

The discussion about the World Cup went on for a while into the train ride, where Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville shared a cabin. Ron showed off a little Viktor Krum figurine he bought as a souvenir. Neville warned him to keep it hidden from Seamus, who was as fanatic about the Irish national team as Ron was about the Chudley Cannons. They were interrupted by their cabin door opening with Draco Malfoy standing at the entrance. Predictably, he sneered at them, saying, "Well, isn't that cute. That's the closest you'll ever come to meeting your idol, Weasley."

"Oh yeah? It's not as if you're ever going to meet him either, Malfoy," Ron shot back.

"Hah! I met him at the World Cup before the game. My father knows the manager and he introduced us to the entire team." Malfoy was obviously enjoying lording this little event over Ron's head. "Well, when he's over here this year, he certainly won't be sitting with the Gryffindors. The Durmstrang school has a much more selective policy for accepting students."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, knowing what Malfoy was hinting at. There would be some sort of tournament this year... oddly enough, neither one could remember the name of it now, although they were sure they had come across those memories at some point

during their Occlumency exercises. Harry decided to goad some more information out of the little Slytherin, hoping it would help jog his memory. "And why would he be visiting Hogwarts, Malfoy?" he asked in the most polite tone he could muster.

Draco scoffed, "Well, obviously a half-breed like you wouldn't know. This is a noble and traditional event that's being revived this year." Harry sighed internally. How long was Malfoy going to drag this out?

"Well, that's why we're asking you, Malfoy," said Harry through gritted teeth.

Draco lifted his nose a bit higher and leered at them. He was obviously enjoying the fact that he (finally) had something to lord over them. "It's the Triwizard Tournament, of course," he said, as if it were common knowledge. "But the likes of you need not apply. Only the worthy are allowed to compete."

The Triwizard Tournament. The name struck a chord in Harry... it was definitely familiar. He'd been there- multiple times, in fact. Oh nuts, he thought, I'll be competing in it whether I want to or not. I'm sure I must have tried not to participate in one of my past lives. Another unclear memory, or emotion, popped up. Cedric! That's why I was worried about him. Try as he might, he still couldn't recall exactly what was going on, but once again, the ideas of portkeys, victory, Cedric, and danger felt intertwined. Did he have to stop Cedric from winning? Hopefully, he'd be able to figure it out in due course. For now, he'd received all the information he really needed from Malfoy, and didn't want to spend another minute with the spoiled, blonde brat. He replied dismissively, "...and somehow you think you're worthy, Malfoy?"

Draco huffed at the implied insult. "You think you could do better than me, Potter? You wouldn't even be able..."

Hermione cut him off. "No, you arrogant brat, he's saying that there's no chance in hell that you'll ever be picked when you're up against any of the seventh-years in this school. You're just a fourth year, and not even top in the class."

Draco, obviously agitated, fell back to his usual insults. "I didn't ask you, mudblood! When I'm entered in the competition, my father will know..."

Hermione knew he was going to say something like that. She laughed, saying, "Unless this Triwizard Tournament is a letter-writing competition, Malfoy, you have no chance of winning." The rest of the cabin laughed with her, as Draco stormed off. Ron shut and locked the door behind him.

"That was brilliant, Hermione. I almost wish he did get picked for the competition, just so we could watch him fail," said Ron.

Neville nodded in agreement. "Well, we really don't have anything to worry about. There's really no point in us entering, to be honest. It'll probably only be the sixth seventh years who are strong enough to do it, and even then only the ones at the top of their year would have a chance."

They quickly fell into a discussion over who were likely candidates from Hogwarts. While Ron and Neville were talking, Harry whispered to Hermione, "Did you have trouble remembering until Malfoy mentioned the tournament, too?"

"Yes... it seems like the information we got out of the original beacon is getting less and less clear. I mean, I remember us talking about those memories our first trip around. You mentioned it by name, even. Harry, do you remember anything about the upcoming year?"

"Something... at the end of the year, I think. We talked about it when we went to Hogsmeade together, I remember that. Voldemort came back, I'm sure of it."

"It's the same thing for me! I remember us discussing those memories after we activated the beacon, but now I can barely remember what those memories were. How about fifth year?"

Harry shook his head. "I still remember something them. Nothing specific, though. It feels more like an hour after waking up and trying to remember the dream. I know I had it, but I can't remember for the life of me. Do you know why?"

"I'm guessing it has to do with the new beacon. The present memory 'dominates,' so it's easier to remember the immediate past, but I think it might be overwriting the memories that were sent back with

the original beacon. How many times have we used the new beacon so far?"

"Twice, right? Once with the World Cup, and another time testing the emergency runes..."

"And the new beacon actually counts and keeps track of how many times we've used it. I think we went back three times with the first beacon, right? I'm forgetting huge chunks of things I'm pretty sure I remembered when we talked about it in Hogsmeade. The only things I remember for sure are the ones I went back packed in occlumency capsules," she replied.

Neville, apparently, overheard something. "Did you mention occlumency? You're learning it? My Gran said something about it helping me get over my nervousness, but continued in the same breath that I wouldn't have the talent for it."

Harry looked at Hermione, who gave him a "finish it later in private" look, and then nodded to Neville. "Yeah, it's something we decided to practice over the summer. You know, it'll help you in Snape's classes. I think the reason why he always knows exactly what to do to scare you is because he's using legilimency."

Neville gaped. "What? How do you know? How often does he do it?"

Harry shrugged. "He tried it on me once, after Sirius Black escaped. He blamed be for it, and I think he was pretty angry and careless, because I could feel him in my mind that day. It's the only time I ever felt his presence, but if he's more subtle normally then I wouldn't know. Hermione and I have been practicing occlumency ever since."

Hermione added, "Would you like us to teach you?"

Before Neville could answer, Ron blurted out, "Hey! You're going to teach me too, right?"

Hermione admitted to herself that she deliberately ignored Ron, given how quickly he had blown off the training during the World Cup. Well, I'll give him one more chance, now that the World Cup excitement is over, she thought. "Of course I'll teach you, Ron, if you're willing to learn." She glanced at Harry when she said the second part. "We can start with the basics right now if you to want."

Neville and Ron both nodded.

"Well, to begin, close your eyes and think of some place that keeps you calm and comfortable. It should be tranquil, quiet, and very simple for you to imagine and remember every detail," Hermione explained.

"Uh... could I get an example?" asked Neville.

"Sure, Nev. I use the sky, above the clouds. There's nothing above, and it's endless clouds below so I don't think about the ground." He didn't bother mentioning the fact that, by now, he had added a giant spaceship hovering in the middle, inspired greatly by Dan Granger's collection of Star Wars and Star Trek videos.

"Hm... could I use my greenhouse? I tend to my plants there in the summer just to get my mind off things."

This took Harry by surprise. Neville had always been fairly good at Herbology, but he wasn't aware he had a greenhouse at home. It certainly explained his very natural talent, though. "Sure, that should work pretty well. Now just focus on it and get rid of anything else, all your memories and emotions. Use it to keep your mind completely calm and blank. You'll eventually be turning this into a map of your mind."

Turning to Ron, he asked, "What image are you using, Ron?"

Just like before, Ron answered, "The Quidditch pitch! Innit obvious?"

Hermione sighed. "No, Ron. That's not a good image for you. You love Quidditch, don't you?" Ron nodded. "And it makes you excited every time you go to the pitch, doesn't it?" Ron nodded again, as if he was doing very well. "Ron, excitement is the complete opposite of calm. Pick something else." Ron's face fell.

A few minutes later, Ron spoke up again. "Alright, how about the library?"

"Why'd you pick the library?" asked Hermione.

"Well, because it's the opposite of the Quidditch pitch, innit? It's boring," Ron said simply.

"Ron..." Hermione let out a slow sigh. "Let me explain. You don't like being in the library, do you?" Ron shook his head. "And you'd rather leave than hang around, right?" Ron nodded. "Ron, that just means it's a place where you're not comfortable." Hermione massaged her temples. Could Ron ever possibly work himself into an emotionless state if he couldn't even figure out what he was feeling himself? This would be an uphill battle, and she didn't even know if the prize was worth it. By the end of the train ride, she still wasn't quite sure whether or not Ron had found a suitable mindscape, while Neville was able to clear his mind fairly adequately.

The welcoming feast proceeded as usual- the hat sang its song, the first years were sorted, food was served. Looking over to the Slytherin tables, Harry noticed Malfoy was acting as arrogant as ever. He was probably boasting about the Triwizard tournament, and how he would enter the competition. Harry also noticed that Malfoy seemed to be facing away from the older Slytherins, perhaps to avoid annoying those who were actually more powerful than him.

Dumbledore stood up and waited until the hubbub died down in the Great Hall. "So!" he began, "now that your stomachs are sated and your thirst is quenched, I have a few announcements to make. First is Mr. Filch's list of banned items, which has expanded again this year to include..." He made his customary speech, but one announcement made the entire room gasp in shock. "Quidditch will be cancelled this year. In its place, a much more exciting event will be taking its place."

"Wha coo be more 'iting than uidditch?" mumbled Ron, with his mouth full. Evidently, he hadn't stopped eating when Dumbledore had called for attention.

"The Triwizard Tournament, Ron," answered Neville. "Malfoy only told us a few hours ago, have you forgotten already?"

"The Triwizard Tournament!" announced Dumbledore. "For the first time in over two hundred years, the international competition between the three largest magical schools in Europe will be held, and we have the honour of hosting it. I ask that all the students of Hogwarts show the greatest hospitality to our guests from

Beauxbatons Academy of Magic and the Durmstrang Institute, who will be staying with us for the duration of the year. Further details about the tournament will be given in two weeks, when the other students arrive. For now, you can read more about it in our school library."

The Great Hall once again burst into chatter, many of the voices confused, some of them excited. Dumbledore raised his hand, and it took another minute for the babbling to quiet down once again.

"Due to our hosting the tournament this year, there will be many visits from Ministry officials and other professionals who will be setting up the various events throughout the year. Please show these hardworking men and women where the bathrooms are, because I certainly had a hard time of it when I began at Hogwarts, myself. I never did manage to find the extremely large one with no less than a hundred chamber-pots..." Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and gave a stern look at Dumbledore.

"Yes... well, there is one new face that you can expect to see all year. I have found a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor who will pull double duty as head of security for the tournament as well. Allow me to introduce to you... Professor Alastor Moody!"

Clink-tak- clink-tak- clink-tak came from the opening of the Great Hall. The sound came from a man with both a metallic leg and a wooden cane. He also had an obviously false eye, which was darting back and forth between everyone in the Great Hall. Harry noticed it seemed to fix on him a little longer than everyone else. His face was so scarred that he'd probably look more human with a leather mask on. He paused at the Slytherin table, eyeing many of the students and gave Draco in particular a small sneer. The boy yelped and jumped back a bit. Turning around, he gave their head of house a feral grin and pointed his cane at him, which caused Professor Snape to stiffen up in his seat. He walked over to the staff table and took his seat without saying a word.

Once again, murmurs swept through the Great Hall. "Did you see his eye?" "Did you see his face?" "Moody? Mad-Eye Moody? The King of Paranoia Moody?" "You think he'll keep the Slytherins under control this year?" "He hates Slytherins. I like him already." The last one was said by Ron.

Harry, however, was feeling just the opposite. Leaning over to Hermione, he said, "Do you have a really strong feeling that we shouldn't trust him?"

"Yes... but at the same time, I'm feeling that he's... reliable. Like he saved my life or something," answered Hermione. "It's weird, and it seems so conflicting."

"Maybe it's because he acted differently in one future than in another?"

"Maybe. I think we should be wary around him, just to be safe."

"You're right. I was a little off the mark with Cedric at the World Cup, but I'm pretty sure now it's the Triwizard Tournament that he'll have problems with. I might be misinterpreting things again," said Harry. They decided to wait until their first class with Professor Moody to see what kind of person he was. The talk and excitement for everyone else over the Triwizard Tournament and their new DADA professor didn't end when the feast did, with everyone chattering away until curfew. Harry, though, had to see his headmaster and head of house.

"Harry, please tell me everything you remember about the... dream you had in the summer?" Harry was sitting directly across from Professor Dumbledore, in his office.

Don't you think I could recall it better if we had discussed this a month ago? Harry thought snidely. At least he had the chance to experience it twice to get a really good idea. "I was inside Voldemort's body, which was about the size of an infant. Pettigrew was nearby, calling him master and setting up some kind of ritual. He spoke in Parseltongue to his snake, telling her to sit at the center of a diagram on the floor. A muggle man, probably the caretaker of the mansion Voldemort was hiding in, told him to get out, but he was then murdered."

"Thank you, Harry. Are there any more specifics that seemed to stand out?" Dumbledore asked as he stroked his beard in thought.

"The muggle man mentioned that the place was called Riddle Manor. I think I might also be able to draw out a little bit of the diagram on the floor, too. Could I have a quill and parchment?"

When Dumbledore gave it to him, Harry began sketching what he could remember. He only got a clear look at a few of the runes on the ground, barely more than five or six out of several hundred that were part of the elaborate ritual, but he did remember the general layout. Handing the parchment back to Dumbledore, he said, "That's really all I could remember. The snake sat in the middle of that. The vision ended right when he cast Avada Kedavra at the muggle man." Harry put extra emphasis on vision, because he was absolutely certain of what he experienced.

"Ah... yes..." murmured Dumbledore as he continued to study the drawing Harry handed back to him. "This is certainly far more detailed than a mere dream. Are you certain about this diagram here?"

"Absolutely," Harry answered with only a word, watching his headmaster's face. Dumbledore clearly recognized and feared the ritual that Voldemort performed.

"Very well. I must admit your ability to remember a few of the runes surprised me. Most students who have not studied the subject would remember little but a few squiggles."

"Actually, I have studied them, all summer. I wanted to ask you about switching courses," Harry said. "I'd like to drop Divination, and take Ancient Runes instead."

"Oh?" Dumbledore looked surprised. "Most people drop the harder course to take something easier, not the other way around. Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, sir," Harry answered. "I've studied with Hermione's notes and I think it's a far more useful subject than divination. The benefits are far more... predictable. Concrete, if you will."

"I have to admit that divination is far more of a woolly subject. I do prefer my socks to be nice and woolly, but not my facts. This vision, however, seems to show you have an aptitude for the subject, though. I will ask you once more. Are you sure you'd like to drop Divination?"

"With all due respect to Professor Trelawney, I don't think her lessons helped me receive that vision this summer. If I were to have

another one, I think I'd get it whether taking Divination or not, so I'd rather just drop it and learn runes instead," Harry answered firmly.

"Very well, Harry. I will inform Professor McGonagall tomorrow, and you should receive your new schedule by dinnertime." Harry was dismissed from Dumbledore's office, and all the twinkle was gone from the old man's eyes.

Their first chance to see Professor Moody in person as the fourth-year Defense professor was on Tuesday. The classroom was empty, but it had been redecorated like Harry had never seen before. The entire classroom was covered with foe-glasses, sneakoscopes, probity probes and other monitoring devices that covered nearly every wall, including the ceiling and some parts of the floors. Most of the students were baffled by this, and even the ones who had heard of Moody's reputation for paranoia were surprised at how far he took it. They all nervously sat down, waiting for Professor Moody to make an appearance.

Suddenly, a closet at the back of the room flew open, and Moody was standing there with his wand raised. "Incarcerous! Incarcerous!" He began to throwing the rope-binding spell from behind everyone. The first few were caught unawares, and were immediately tied up. A few others managed to face Moody before they were caught, but went down within seconds. Several others froze in surprise or fear once they realized what was happening, and Moody also seemed to target them first, which included Neville and Ron. It wasn't until he wrapped up nearly a third of the students that the others began to scramble away, diving to the floor or hiding behind the desks. Harry was one of the first to shield himself with a desk, and Hermione followed suit. Unfortunately, he dropped his wand in the process, and it took several seconds for him to pick it up again. He threw off the same combination of hexes he used on Draco at the end of last year- Silencio, Petrificus Totalus, and Incarcerous.

Immediately, Moody stopped attacking the class. Evidently, none of the spells actually managed to hit him, as he strode to the front of the room while shouting at the class. "It's about time, you lazy moppets! What class do you think this is?" He scanned the entire class, while his fake eye seemed to be glaring at the ones who were bound in ropes.

"Um... Defense Against Dark Arts? Sir?" came a meek voice from the back.

"Correct! Now, how on earth do you sack of potatoes think you can defend yourself against the Dark Arts if you're never prepared? I've seen Mexican jumping beans move faster than you! CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" He barked out the last two words, making everyone jump. He continued to berate the entire class. "I took down three of you before anyone even thought to turn figure out why. I took down a third of you before the rest figured out you had to run. I was halfway through the entire class before someone was smart enough to try and stop me! Now, who's the one who gave me the Dueller's Hello?"

Harry raised his hand. "It was me... err, what do you mean by the Dueller's Hello?"

"Good lad, even if you were a bit slow on the uptake. It's called that because it's the first thing that comes out of most dueller's mouths. You're telling me you threw that combination of spells without learning what it actually is?" Moody was eyeing him carefully, with both his eyes.

"Err... no, it just knew I needed to stop you somehow, and those spells just seemed really easy to cast one after the other," Harry said. He knew he must have trained himself sometime in one of his past futures, but he honestly couldn't remember when exactly he learned or practiced it.

"Then you've certainly got some natural talent for duelling, but what took you so long to get those spells off?"

"Err... I dropped my wand when I ducked behind the desk."

"And where do you keep your wand, boy?"

"In my pocket..." Harry began to think that was a very wrong answer.

"Your POCKET? Where do you plan to cast all your spells, the floor? Who else keeps their wands in their pockets?" Several students meekly raised their hands. "I certainly hope that those of you who aren't raising your hands are keeping your wands someplace better!" He looked over at Su Li, one of the Ravenclaws. "You! Draw

your wand!" He immediately began throwing stinging hexes at the girl, who apparently left her wand in her book bag. Flinching and wincing from the pain the entire way, Moody shot off at least fifteen hexes before she managed to finally get her wand in hand.

Moody shook his head in disappointment. "Fifteen hexes! Every one of those could have been a stunner, a slicer, a bludgeoner, a petrifying curse, or even a killing curse. You would have been dead fifteen times over if I wasn't such a kind and gentle old man." He heard a suppressed snort of laughter from the other side of the room. Malfoy and his little band of Slytherins were apparently laughing at the Ravenclaw's misfortune.

"Oh, so you think you can do better, Mr. Malfoy?" Moody growled.

Draco smirked at Su and said, "Of course. My father bought me a wand holster..." before he could finish talking, he was hit by a stinging hex.

"Well, boy? Where's that wand of yours?" Moody continued to fire while talking. Apparently he could do those spells wordlessly, and very rapidly. Draco ejected his wand from the arm-holster, but was struck by another hex right when it shot out, and it flew out of his grasp. It dropped to the ground several feet in front of him, and he had to scramble towards it to pick it up, suffering stinging hexes all the way. In the end, Draco took far longer than Su, and was struck by twenty-five stingers. Everyone was glad to see the loudmouthed bully taken down a peg, but nobody dared to laugh at his misfortune in front of Moody.

"In case any of you still don't understand, I expect every single one of you to have your wand in hand in this class or ready to draw your wand at a moment's notice. This is Defense Against the Dark Arts, and you will NEVER be able to defend yourself unless you practice CONSTANT VIGILANCE!"

"Well, that was certainly an interesting class," said Harry. He was practicing Occlumency in the Gryffindor common room along with Hermione and Neville the first weekend of the school year. Ron decided to play chess with Dean instead.

"I'll say," said Neville. "He certainly knows how to get his point across, though."

"I have to admit, even though he's the most unorthodox teacher we've had so far, I get the feeling we'll learn a lot from him," agreed Hermione.

"Well, at least we know he's got experience keeping himself safe," said Harry, pointing towards the twins. The redheaded duo, after hearing stories of his first lessons (but before they had their first class), made a very unfortunate mistake- they attempted to prank Moody. They had laid a trap for him between his classroom and the office, which was supposed to swap his wooden walking-stick with his metallic prosthetic leg. Somehow, Moody not only dispelled the trap, but also knew exactly who had laid it, and tracked them down halfway across the castle. Fred ended up crawling into the infirmary that day with both legs transfigured into wooden sticks, while George dragged himself there with both legs turned to metal. Sufficed to say, they were constantly vigilant the during their entire first class with Moody.

After checking each other's minds with Legilimency, they decided it was time to test out Neville. They didn't expect him to be able to fend off an attack, but they wanted him to let it know what it felt like when someone was probing his mind. "Neville, don't let anyone know about what I'm going to do next, alright? Kids like us aren't exactly supposed to know how to do this..." Harry said, looking around to make sure nobody was listening in.

Neville raised an eyebrow, but agreed. Harry continued, "I'd like you to concentrate on that greenhouse of yours. Try to empty it out, but leave only one memory in there for me to get. Um... how about the first broom lesson back in first year? When you're ready, look me in the eyes."

Neville closed his eyes, concentrated, and after a minute looked straight at Harry without a word. Harry quietly cast Legilimens, and immediately found himself in Neville's greenhouse. There was a single plant at the center, and as he approached it, he began to feel Neville's anticipation, fear, self-doubt, and anxiousness, everything he felt back in the first year flying lesson. As he got closer, he began to see images, and some glimpses of the argument with Draco from Neville's point of view. Thinking he had gone far enough, he pulled out.

"Good, it seems like you're getting pretty good at keeping your memories organized," complimented Harry. "Could you feel me inside your mind?"

Neville nodded. "It was like... fingers reaching in. So that's how I'll know if someone's using Legilimency on me?"

Harry smiled. "That's right, Nev. Just keep working on the organization, and practice having your mind in that state as often as you can- all day if you can manage it. It's better to get used to having your defences up all the time. You know, like Moody said... Constant Vigilance!"

Neville nodded and went back to concentrating on his own. Harry got up with Hermione, and they left Gryffindor Tower to sneak off to the Room of Requirement again to practice their duelling, Animagi transformations, and try to figure out their apprehensive feelings towards Moody. The room provided a comfortable, padded room with a duelling arena in the center and a hidden entrance. They sat down on the cushions surrounding the duelling arena. Hermione spoke first. "What if he's a spy for someone else? Or an impostor? Maybe he's using Polyjuice?"

Harry thought about it for a minute. "We don't know him well enough to figure out his allegiances. If he has turned traitor or something, maybe one of the other staff will notice. Didn't he fight alongside them during the last war? They should know him fairly well, at least. If he's an impostor, though, we can figure it out tonight at dinner with the Marauder's Map." Even if that checked out, they could talk to Professor McGonagall or Dumbledore later to ask if they noticed him acting differently from how they remembered him in the last war.

Harry and Hermione decided to make use of the room by working on their duelling skills next. Following the first duelling book to get a good overview (or was it review?) of the fundamentals, they began with the protego spell. Both of them, to some mild surprise, managed to do a decent one on their first try, so they tested it out on each other by firing off minor jinxes and hexes until their shields failed. They also worked on changing the size and shape of the shield, expanding it to protect their entire body, or an object beside them. After practicing until they were nearly exhausted, they decided to relax and meditate, concentrating on their Animagus forms.

Throughout the summer, they both felt that they could get in touch with their primal emotions much better when they were together. They had never quite managed to find their forms, however, and failed to progress much further. This time, since they were both exhausted from their first duelling training session, they fell asleep beside each other while in their meditative trance.

Harry found himself flying through the air. Looking at the ground below him, it seemed like he was about the same height as he was when he usually flew during a Quidditch match. Flying back and forth, he looked around for the other players, but couldn't find anyone else. Where was the team? Where were the spectators? He was struck with a sudden sense of homesickness when he realized he was alone. Turning back in the direction where he came from, he started searching for home. Where was his home? He couldn't tell. He wanted safety, comfort... companionship. He knew where he could get it. Hermione's house! Which direction was it? Where did he have to go? He remembered Hermione's home, in a city by the sea. He flew and flew until he reached the ocean. An odd thought struck him as he continued his search. I really shouldn't show up without a gift. As he thought that, he saw something sparkle in the water. The golden snitch! Once again, he let his instinct take over as his sight narrowed and he focused all his strength into diving as fast as he could towards it. Oddly, he didn't reach out to grab it with his hands, but instead used his feet, and then noticed his feet were actually talons. They gripped the snitch viciously, refusing to let go as he went on in search of Hermione's house. He couldn't see it... but something smelled familiar. He moved towards it... yes, it was Hermione's scent. Onwards he flew.

Hermione was standing tall in the grass. She could see in every direction, and she, too, was alone. Using her keen eyes, she scanned the field in front of her. What was she looking for? She was missing something. Or was it someone? She was missing someone. Or maybe not. Someone was missing her. She hopped up on top of a rock for a better view. She was here, and she was waiting. Someone needed her, and she was waiting for them. Was she waiting in the right place? She couldn't see them. She couldn't hear them, hold him, smell him... him. Harry. Harry was searching for her. Where could he be? Where could he find her? Instinctively, she looked down to the ground again. Underground. Underground is safe, underground is comfortable, underground is secret. Their secret, only they could go there... the Chamber of Secrets! She

needed to find the Chamber. Hopping across the field, she investigated a hole in the ground. Did that one lead to the Chamber? She jumped in, then back out. No. Next one. She continued to search.

They woke up in each other's arms, gripping each other like as if their lives depended on it. Both of them thought of breaking apart, but both also decided to savour the moment instead. When it was clear to each of them that the other was awake, Harry told Hermione about his dream. "I was flying. I was searching for you... I had to find you, Hermione. I, uh, also tried to get you a gift."

Hermione looked at seductively, biting her lower lip. "A gift, huh? What did you get me?"

Harry avoided her gaze, and muttered, "The golden snitch."

Hermione's seductive gaze disappeared instantly. "That's really romantic, Harry," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm and half a smile crossing her lips.

"Hey! It was just a dream! I didn't really have control over it," he said defensively. "And what did you dream about, by the way?"

"I was waiting for you. I was trying to find the Chamber of Secrets by jumping into holes in the ground..." Hermione said. When Harry looked like he was trying to suppress his laughter, Hermione added, "It was just a dream, alright? It made sense then."

"Well, in any case, I'm pretty sure this means my animagus form is some kind of bird. With talons."

"And mine is some kind of burrowing animal... I just hope I'm not a rat," Hermione said, as she made a face. They decided to lay there for a while and enjoy each other's presence again, just like how they found themselves when they woke up.

When they realized their afternoon nap had taken them to dinnertime, they quickly made their way back to Gryffindor Tower to grab the Marauder's Map before heading to the Great Hall. Right outside the entrance, Harry hid behind the corner while Hermione peeked in, looking at the staff table. "Is he there?" asked Harry.

"Yes, he's sitting at his chair," answered Hermione. "What does the map say?"

"It's him alright. Alastor Moody." Harry folded up the map, they proceeded inside for dinner. They resolved to get more background information on Moody by asking the other staff members the next day.

Author's chapter end notes:

- This is where I'm going to start messing around with canon. I didn't like the original explanation of Barty-was-polyjuiced-all-year-to-kidnap-Harry so I've changed how things work, hopefully for the better. I'm also changing the Triwizard events, which I might explain next chapter as well.

- Chapter revised, added a scene with dumbledore.

Chapter 10: Suspicions

"Professor McGonagall, we'd like to ask you a few questions about Professor Moody." Harry and Hermione had stayed behind after their Transfiguration class, hoping to get a better picture of Moody's character from their Head of House.

"What would you need to ask me for that you couldn't ask him directly?" McGonagall had always had a strong sense of fair play—and, of course, bravery. Talking about people behind their backs wasn't something she approved of.

Hermione gave a well-practised reply. "We haven't exactly had a pleasant record of DADA teachers, especially not Harry. I mean, in first year, it was Quirrel, who Harry defeated to get the philosopher's stone. In second year, Lockhart vanished his bones once, and tried to obliviate him. Professor Lupin was the only good teacher we've had. We'd like to know if you've ever known Professor Moody outside of Hogwarts."

Professor McGonagall frowned, but nodded in agreement. "I agree you haven't received a... consistent education these past few years in DADA. However, I can assure you that Moody certainly knows enough about the subject. He used to be Head Auror at the Ministry. He refused to take the post of Head of Magical Law Enforcement because, as he claimed, he 'couldn't catch dark hooligans from behind a desk.' Although he's never taught schoolchildren before, he trained dozens of Aurors at the academy for a decade after the end of the last war. That might be why he seems like such a harsh teacher. He's used to working with people who are older, more powerful, and more willing to learn the subject."

Harry nodded. "Um... can I ask you if he's been acting any differently? Or unusually?"

The professor gave them a warm chuckle. "I suppose you're talking about his rather odd habits? Scanning his food for poison, drinking from his hip flask, all the dark detectors he has around his classroom and the general... paranoia? He's been like that for years. Even before the first war against You-Know-Who. He was a young recruit back during the rise of the previous dark lord, Grindelwald. I believe one of his comrades turned out to be a spy for Grindelwald. It's how he lost his leg, right in enemy territory. He fought his way

out somehow, but he could rarely trust anyone completely after that."

They thanked their professor for her time. The following day, they tried the same thing with Professor Flitwick.

"So you'd like to know more about Professor Moody?" The normally cheerful, diminutive professor grinned a rather feral grin. "My suggestion to you is never to take him head-on."

Harry gave him a blank look. "We... err... weren't planning to."

"Good! Because in all my years as a professional dueller before I came to Hogwarts, I've never seen anyone fight like him. Then again, I've never had a chance to duel him properly. I'm sure, with all the rules and regulations in place, I could still beat him in an arena, but I'd never imagine trying to take him on out in the field. His style of combat would have you bleeding on the ground before the referee could count the number of fouls he'd committed. You can certainly learn a lot about magical combat from that man, about as much as you could learn from me about duelling."

Professor Flitwick made him sound scary- an international champion of duelling just admitted, flat-out, that he would lose in a real fight against Moody. Hermione nervously asked, "But he's fair, right? You'd trust him to use his skills... for justice?"

"Oh, of course! He always tried to capture his targets alive and give them a proper trial. Mind you, 'alive' just means 'alive.' He'd rarely try to stop someone with a mere stunner. He always made sure he took them down hard enough that they couldn't get back up again, except to sit in a chair in front of the Wizengamot. As far as trust goes, you'd have a harder time proving to him that you're on the side of the Light than the other way around. He rarely trusts anyone, even old friends have to prove their identity with secret questions whenever they meet. He's still keeping tabs on all the younger professors here at Hogwarts, like Professor Vector."

Again, thanking their Charms professor for his time, Harry and Hermione left. It seemed Moody wasn't a problem... at least, not yet.

A little over two weeks after school began, Hermione celebrated her fifteenth birthday. They held the party in the Gryffindor Common

Room and invited all the Gryffindors, where Dobby delivered the cake. Harry had owled Madam Rosmerta to order some butterbeer, which Dobby picked up as well. He made sure to give the little house-elf three pairs of socks for the effort. After generous helpings of cake and several rounds of "Happy birthday Hermione!" were given by everyone, it was time to open up the presents.

Ron had bought her a book... on Quidditch. Still, at least he was trying. "Now you'll have something exciting to read about!" said Ron, as she unwrapped the present. She gave a polite "thank-you" and picked up the next gift.

Neville had also chosen to give her a book, Fantastic Flora of France. Apparently, France had some of the widest varieties of magical flowers, most of which were extremely beautiful. Hermione gave the boy a hug in thanks. Harry knew he just had to sneak a look into that book for future reference.

The twins' gift was a dozen quills. Hermione knew they couldn't possibly be ordinary quills, so she eyed them carefully and didn't touch them before asking the twins, "So... is there anything special I should know about these quills?"

They replied, "Welcome to the fantastic world..."

"Of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes!"

"The greatest source..."

"For pranks, jokes, gags..."

"And everything else to make your entire life more interesting!"

Hermione raised her eyebrow. "Well, that was interesting, but what's so special about these quills in particular?"

George explained. "Well, these are our Dozen Duplicate Dicta-Quills! We've turned the plain, old Dicta-quill and made it even more convenient by allowing you to make up to a dozen copies at the same time of anything you dictate to a single quill! Not only that, they're charmed to work a good distance away from each other, so they can be in separate rooms or still work!"

Fred continued. "They work if you write the normal way, too. We figured it was an easy way to make our own copies of the answer keys..." Hermione glared at him furiously for that. "...but we figured a brilliant mind like yours would find a much, much nobler use for our inventions," he finished.

Hermione gave them a slightly scornful look. "Well, thanks anyways, guys." Looking around the room, she added, "and no, I won't be using these to make copies of my homework for anyone." Half the room laughed while the other half drooped their heads in disappointment.

Her parents had made use of Karris, who delivered a letter of congratulations and her gift, a pair of high-end leather gloves. Evidently, her mother knew her size well, as the gloves fit her perfectly.

Harry's gift was, at first glance, just another book. It was a thick leather-bound tome without a title, but it also had a metal frame across the covers. Upon opening it, the pages were all blank. Hermione gave him an odd look. "I hope this isn't a diary, Harry. Especially not one that writes back." Ginny stiffened in the background.

Harry laughed. "No, it's a recording tome. It can copy and store any book you have. You see this metal frame? Just swing it around so it faces the opposite direction, and place another book here..." He grabbed Neville's gift, and clamped the metallic, jaw-like covers over it. "...and it will copy the entire contents of the book onto this tome. You can recall the book simply by saying the title, or by calling it up from a list. It'll hold about two thousand books or a million pages." Opening up the tome, *Fantastic Flora of France* was listed in small text on the first page. Tapping the name, the title etched itself into the leather at the front of the tome, and its pages filled in exact copies of the book Neville gave.

Hermione squealed and gave Harry a hug. "This is just what I needed, Harry! Thank you!" she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. When she pulled back, she found herself staring into Harry's bright green eyes, and Harry into her deep brown ones. They were instantly lost in each other's gazes, and without thinking, both of them gravitated towards each others' lips and began a slow, gentle

kiss. As they let the waves of euphoria wash over them, they didn't notice how silent the entire room had become. They were lost in their own little world. Nobody would disturb them, and nobody could if they tried.

When they finished, they realized everyone in the common room was staring at them. Hermione showed some mild embarrassment, but Harry was wondering what was wrong. The kiss felt so right, and it wasn't as if they were going wild with each other... why did it seem like such a big deal? Oh, I forgot. Nobody else knows we're together... even though it's been over two months for us, he remembered.

"Right then, so should we officially change the results of Harry's Love Pool to 'September of Fourth Year with Hermione Granger' now?"

Everyone waited for Hermione to berate the twins once again, but she just decided to lean over on to Harry, and said, "You know, just go with it. I've had a fantastic birthday and I'm not going to spoil it by getting mad at you two jokers."

After everyone else left the party and began to go back to their schoolwork, Harry whispered to Hermione, "I still have one more thing to give you. Come with me." Harry led Hermione up to his dorm, where Dean and Seamus were working on their homework. Seamus saw Hermione, and grinned at Harry, saying, "Wow, you work fast don'tcha mate? Bringing her to bed already? It's not even dark out!"

Harry laughed, not bothering to reply to the tease. He brought his Firebolt out from under his bed, and told Hermione, "Hop on. I still owe you the flying lesson, remember? We haven't had a chance to fly together all summer."

Hermione gaped. "What? Here?"

"Yeah, of course. We'll just go straight out the window," he replied casually.

Still looking at him incredulously, she sputtered, "But... but we're on the seventh floor! It's so high up..."

"Well, just hold on tight," Harry said, grabbing one of Hermione's arms and wrapping it around him. She put her other arm around his waist and held on as Harry took off, flying right through the window.

They sailed over the castle, weaving around the various towers. They circled above the astronomy tower, which was well known for its romantic views, and gained an even better vantage to the landscape around them. They then looped around the Owlery a few times until Hedwig noticed them and joined in for a few minutes, giving several hoots in greeting. Turning towards the Black lake, Harry skimmed the surface and provided the same view that the first-years received on their arrival to Hogwarts. From there, it was a few loops around the Quidditch pitch, which Hermione had never seen from a player's perspective. The flight finally ended with a view of the sunset behind Hogwarts castle, which was even more beautiful than what they witnessed from the Burrow. Upon landing at the front gates, Hermione touched her forehead to Harry's, placing her arms around his neck, and whispered, "That was the best birthday I've ever had. I love you, Harry."

A simple "you're welcome" and a kiss ended their private moment as they stepped back into the castle.

A week before the other schools arrived with their delegations, the castle was cleaned from top to bottom. All the ghosts were enlisted to keep Peeves in line, while all the students scrubbed every surface and swept every room, much to Filch's enjoyment. The punishments for defacing or dirtying the castle were an instant week in detention, keeping anyone troublesome out of harm's way until after the welcoming ceremony was over. Professor McGonagall nearly dedicated all her time making sure Fred and George were kept in line, threatening to confiscate their wands for the duration of the entire year, except during classes, if they stepped out of line. Three days before the arrival, they began having "practice runs" of the greeting ceremony. Although there was little to do other than stand in a straight line with clean robes on, the professors still managed to find errors and nitpick away.

The day of arrival was sunny, but chilly. The students thanked the heavens that it wasn't raining, because it was made abundantly clear to them that they were to stand there until all the foreign students were inside, rain or shine. The Beauxbatons carriages came flying in at around three o'clock, and the Durmstrang ship rose

from the Black Lake an hour later. Each school had brought along about two dozen of their top students. After the formal greetings between headmasters and staff, the students were ushered into the Great Hall for the official introduction to the Triwizard Tournament.

Inside the Great Hall, many small, round tables had replaced the four long house tables. After everyone had settled down, they were introduced to a few new faces. Madam Olympe Maxime, the headmistress of Beauxbatons, and Igor Karkaroff, Headmaster of Durmstrang. Also present were Ludo Bagman, Director of Magical Games and Sports, and Bartemius Crouch, Director of International Cooperation. A dull, mandatory round of applause came for every one of them. Finally, they reached the subject of everyone's interest- the Triwizard Tournament. Ludo Bagman explained.

"This tournament has been a traditional competition between the three greatest magical schools in all of Europe. Competition was fierce and contestants were brave and strong, but it became more and more dangerous as each school attempted to trump the last by hosting more exotic and extreme challenges. Two hundred years ago, the tournament ended, when no participant managed to survive the final task." Many people gasped, but Bagman continued.

"Obviously, now that we have chosen to revive it, we will be enacting far greater safety precautions, and the emphasis will be on friendly competition. All the schools have agreed that the safety of the participants will be top priority. However, don't think that this will be easy! All the participants will have to demonstrate their strength, skill, intelligence, planning, resourcefulness, and grace under pressure to win this tournament." Gleeful conversations began throughout the hall, with all the students wondering who would enter.

Bagman held up a hand, and continued his speech. "Before you enter, you need to know the terms. First, as everyone must be eager to hear, are the prizes for the winner. Your eternal fame, recorded within the hall of records as the winner of the Triwizard Tournament, along with one thousand galleons prize money." Nobody could keep quiet now. One thousand galleons was a lot of money- no student had ever held that much to themselves. Even the richest purebloods, like Malfoy, never saw that much in his allowances. Ron was practically drooling at the announcement. Harry, on the other hand, didn't care. He received double that amount annually from his trust

fund alone. On the other hand, he just knew he would be entered into the tournament, whether he wanted to or not.

"Now, before all of you get too excited, I'll tell you about the competition itself. It is made up of four trials of elements, and three trials of champions. There will be a final champion's task at the end of the year to determine the winner, for a total of eight events for the eight months from November to June. We can't tell you exactly what each trial consists of, because the champions themselves will only be told the details shortly beforehand to prepare for each of the trials and the final task. The champions themselves will be selected by an impartial judge. Professor Dumbledore, if you please?"

With a flick of Dumbledore's wand, a large podium rose out of the ground in front of the staff table. On top of it sat a bejewelled metal casket, which Dumbledore opened with his hands. Inside stood a wooden goblet, intricate carvings on its side, but seemingly unexceptional.

"This is the impartial judge that will choose the champion for each school. When the fire has been lit, those who wish to participate must sign their name and school on a piece of parchment and drop it into the goblet. The champions will be chosen at the end of this month, on the evening of October 31st. However, please note that there will be an age limit. You must be of age, that is, seventeen years old to participate. That means you must turn seventeen by the 31st to be able to enter. The goblet will be protected by an age line as well as other security features until then. Good luck to all those who intend to participate." Screams of outrage, mostly coming from the sixth years, rang through the Hall. None of the foreign students seemed to be surprised in the least- obviously they had known before coming.

Hermione laughed and nudged Harry. "Look at Malfoy," was all she whispered to him. Harry knew what she was hinting at. Turning around, he saw a tomato-faced Slytherin sitting with his fellow fourth-years. Draco had been boasting all month that he would not only enter, but be selected as the Hogwarts Champion.

Harry whispered back to Hermione, "If you think he looks embarrassed now, wait till I get picked as a fourth champion." Hermione gave him a short look in confusion that quickly turned into

understanding. "It's a shame we don't know how it's going to happen, though."

Drinks and light snacks appeared at the tables as everyone in the Great Hall was encouraged to mix and mingle in an opportunity for some "cultural exchange." It wasn't going quite as smoothly as the organizers had hoped, though. The Beauxbatons students mostly kept to themselves, while the Hogwarts students almost immediately divided themselves back into their separate houses. The Durmstrang students weren't avoiding people per se, but it was more like others were avoiding them. They simply looked unapproachable, but Malfoy took this as an opportunity to flaunt his family name and cozy up to some of them- especially one famous seeker for the Bulgarian National Team. Ron was itching to go talk to him, so Harry and Hermione approached, overhearing the conversation he was having with Draco.

"...and with such pure-blooded standards as yours, my father very nearly sent me to Durmstrang, you see. I could have been one of your classmates."

Viktor Krum scoffed. "A little boy like you vood never haff entered Durmstrang. You beleeff you are worth something. You are not."

Malfoy was quickly enraged by the famous Durmstrang student's offhand dismissal. "Do you know who I am? I'm a Malfoy! My father is..."

Viktor rolled his eyes. "Your father, your name, that is all you haff, boy. You haff no magic, you haff no strength. In Drumstrang, names do not cast spells." Several Durmstrang students laughed, causing Draco to storm off, with his little entourage in tow. Hermione overheard a few murmurs of the Durmstrang students discussing the little encounter.

"...Hogwarts is decadent. They take students if they haff gold. De Tournament vill be easy to win."

"...he still cries to his father! Such babies they breed in this country!"

Hermione was intrigued by the students' attitudes. Durmstrang was well known for being a pure-blood school. At least, that was its reputation in Britain. Cautiously, she walked up to the group of fur-

robed students, and asked "Excuse me, but I've heard that Durmstrang only accepts pure-blood students, but you just ridiculed one of the most pure-blooded student in our school..."

Two of the students beside Viktor laughed. "The two off us are half-blood. Blood has no vorth in Durmstrang. Only power."

Hermione was surprised at this. "But if that's the case, why don't you take in muggleborns? Surely many of them have the potential to be powerful wizards..."

Viktor answered her with a question. "Hogwarts accepts all students who apply and pay money, yes?" Hermione nodded. "Durmstrang is different. Students must compete before entering school."

Hermione understood, but was clearly angered by the explanation. "You have to know magic before school even starts, then! Muggleborn have a clear handicap! That's completely unfair!"

Viktor shrugged. "I am here to make myself a strong vizard. Not try to change rules. Not my problem." He turned and left to chat with some seventh years, those who he viewed as possible competition.

The chatter and gossip didn't end with the party. Fred and George were peeved that they couldn't enter, because their birthday was only a few months short of the limit. Ron was still in awe over the prize money, imagining the kinds of broomsticks and chocolate he could buy with it.

"Harry, we've got a small request for you." Harry turned to see the twins, with rarely-seen serious expressions on their faces.

"We need to borrow the map." Harry knew what they were up to already.

"And we'd like to borrow your Invisibility Cloak." Harry was reluctant to leave his trusty cloak, which had served him very well the past several years, to the twins. It could be confiscated if the twins got caught. Sure, the twins had a reputation for being able to pull off pranks and rarely getting caught in the process, only receiving the punishments after the prank had been completed, but Harry didn't want to risk such a precious family heirloom. He was, however, curious to see what the twins planned to do.

"I'll tell you what," answered Harry. "I can't lend you the cloak... but I'll go to the Goblet of Fire with you. I'll wear my cloak and hold on to the map myself to scout ahead to make sure it's clear, and then I'll signal to you to do whatever it is you plan to do."

The twins agreed to the compromise and explained their plans. "We'll be brewing aging potions tomorrow. They should be ready by evening. We want to sneak off after curfew and try to get past the age line. We've also got these nice little Arm Extenders... a Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes exclusive... as an alternative method for getting our names in. Meet us tomorrow night, down here at eleven, alright?"

The following night, Harry and the twins snuck out of the common room, quietly making their way down to the Great Hall. They had to use the secret passages and hidden alcoves several times as professors and prefects were still roaming the halls. "Wait!" George suddenly stopped them while they were hiding on the 4th floor. "Check where Moody is. I swear that eye of his can see through walls."

Harry scanned the map, looking for a dot labelled Alastor Moody. "He's still in his office, with Bartemius Crouch. Probably having some kind of meeting about security or something." They continued downstairs, stopping a floor above the Great Hall. Keeping his eye on the map, Harry said, "It's only professor Babbling patrolling the entrance of the Great Hall. Nobody's inside, so as long as you can get past her, you should be safe. Do you two have anything to cause a distraction?"

Fred grinned. "Who do you think you're talking to, Harry?" he said as he pulled out a pile of knickknacks. "Would you like the classic dungbomb, whizzing worms, or some of our personal inventions, like the Wyvernwork?"

"What's the Wyvernwork?"

"It's a firework that explodes in the shape of a tiny dragon, and it flies around for a while. We're still working on how to make it bigger, as well as having a full lineup of Bursting Beasties."

"That'll do," said Harry. "I'll set it off further down the hall. When she moves away, get into the Great Hall. When you're finished, move and stand by the doors. I'll watch you on the map, and set off another one so you guys can escape." Satisfied with the plan, the twins handed Harry two of the Wyvernworks, who silently made his way downstairs. About thirty paces away from the Great Hall, he lit one of the little fireworks and hurried around a corner to wait. It went off after he ducked behind a suit of armor, exploding into a brilliant little dragon-shaped creature made up of green sparkles. It even breathed a few red sparkle-flames from its mouth. Predictably, Professor Babbling ran down the hall to investigate, and Harry watched the two dots on the map enter the Great Hall. Keeping as still as possible, he made no noise at all as Babbling searched the hall up and down for him.

He kept watch on the dots of Fred and George Weasley as they moved towards the front of the hall where the Goblet of Fire was placed. They seemed to circle around the cup a few times, but then scrambled back. Uh oh, thought Harry. I take it that means they didn't do too well... There was suddenly a flurry of movement on the map. Multiple professors were descending on the Great Hall. Oh, nuts, the twins will have hell to pay if they're caught by Moody again, he realized. It figures that the Goblet would have more security than just an age line. He was about to set off another Wyvernwork when he noticed something odd on the map. Moody hadn't left his office. Crouch, however, had. This is even worse. They'll be in trouble with a ministry official!

Harry quickly moved towards the hall where Crouch was coming from. Hoping to distract Crouch, or at least delay his arrival, he lit the firework just before the man was about to round the corner. While the fuse was burning, Harry heard a familiar Clink-tak- clink-tak sound. How did Moody get here so fast? He was still in his office last time I looked... Harry quickly dug out his map, and saw the name Bartemius Crouch moving down the hallway, where the sound was coming from. It rounded the corner, and Harry got a good look at man- it was Moody, complete with peg-leg, cane, and fake eye. Harry only had a second to do a double-take with the map before the Wyvernwork exploded, with the sparkling creature flying straight towards the impostor. Crouch- or was it Moody?- yelped as he covered his fake eye, obviously sensitive to the pyrotechnics. Harry took advantage of the situation and fled.

This is huge... why would Crouch be impersonating Moody? I need to tell a professor. He scanned the map, looking for Albus Dumbledore, but it wasn't anywhere on the map. The headmaster must have left the grounds, probably dealing with ministry officials or something. Meanwhile, it seemed that many of the professors were investigating the area where he had set off the Wyvernwork, while several others were escorting Fred and George towards the infirmary while Crouch was in the Great Hall by himself. Harry searched for the next choice- Professor McGonagall. He found her keeping close to Gryffindor Tower, patrolling the halls of the seventh floor. Putting his invisibility cloak away, he ran up the many flights of stairs to find his head of house.

"Mr. Potter, what are you doing roaming the halls at this hour?" McGonagall asked, entirely unsurprised.

Out of breath after running up six flights of stairs, Harry panted, "I... need... to talk... something... strange... Crouch..."

"Catch your breath, Mr. Potter. Now tell me, what's going on? The staff just received an alert that somebody attempted to bypass the Goblet's protections. It wasn't you who made the attempt, was it?" McGonagall asked, with displeasure in her voice. "The rules were very clear, Mr. Potter. I'll not have you besmirching the name of Gryffindor with such foolish escapades..."

"No! It wasn't me... I was just lending the twins a hand... but that's not the problem!" cried Harry. "Bartemius Crouch is doing something strange- I think he took polyjuice and impersonated Professor Moody! I just saw him a few minutes ago..."

Professor McGonagall looked doubtful. "Mr. Potter, may I ask how you came to that conclusion? Polyjuice is a very complex potion which makes a perfectly changes a person to look like somebody else. I find it hard to imagine that you could tell the difference between one person and a polyjuiced impostor, when most Aurors wouldn't be able to without several advanced spells or a blood verification." Harry was trying to decide whether or not to tell her about the map while McGonagall continued.

"Secondly, why do you suspect Mr. Crouch? He is not on school grounds at all tonight. He, along with Ludo Bagman and the Headmasters of all three schools are currently at a meeting with the

Minister of Magic. They won't return until tomorrow morning. Do you have a better explanation, or is this just a ruse to give Messrs. Fred and George Weasley time to escape? We all know they can't resist trying to get past the goblet's protections." Harry was stunned at the news. He couldn't possibly say that he saw the name on a map that was made decades ago by a bunch of sixth-years... it would be his word against the Headmaster's. Or two headmasters and a headmistress, along with the Minister of Magic himself. Keeping quiet and investigating by himself might be the best option for now.

Harry hung his head down, saying, "I'm sorry, Professor. I was... um... helping the twins tonight. They wanted their names in the cup, and I offered to be a distraction. I just wanted to get you away from Gryffindor Tower so they could sneak back in." It wasn't a complete lie, at least. "I'll take whatever punishment you think fair."

"We'll discuss it tomorrow morning, Mr. Potter. You will stay behind after class tomorrow, after I have verified this story with the Weasley twins. I'll determine your punishment then. Now get to bed, it's far past curfew."

Harry rushed back into his dorm, and opened up the map again. He saw Moody, still in his office. The twins were sitting in the infirmary, and the rest of the professors had gone back to their patrols. The dot labelled Bartemius Crouch was nowhere to be seen.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- yes, the Triwizard Tournament will consist of eight events total (nine if you include the Yule Ball). The reason is just that it makes more sense, really. It's a famous international competition that lasts all school year. Three events, with 3-4 months in between each just doesn't hold public interest very well. Heck, the Olympics only last two weeks! This way, the Triwizard has about one event each month, starting in November, that lasts until June. I'll reveal them as the story progresses. I'd also like to recommend the story *The Lie I've Lived* by jbern, which is a GoF rewrite that also changes the events significantly. I was certainly inspired by his work, but I'm not trying to copy the events he invented. I hope you guys enjoy it.

Chapter 11: Investigations

The twins showed up the next morning when Harry was explaining to Hermione what had happened. By an amazing coincidence, he had just gotten to the part of the story where the twins were approaching the Goblet when they appeared.

"Allow us to take the story from here, Harry." Harry turned around to see the twins with long, white beards that looked remarkably similar to Dumbledore's.

"You see, we first tried to figure out how far away the age line was. With careful observation and investigation, we found out exactly where the age line extended," said Fred.

"In other words, you saw the chalk outline on the ground?" asked Hermione, smirking.

"Why yes we did, my fair maiden. It was a good five meters around the cup, well out of reach of our Arm Extenders," explained George.

"But we tried them anyways. We flicked the parchment with our names towards the Goblet."

"A most perfect toss, mind you, it was sailing straight towards that flaming cup..."

"When the fire suddenly burned twice as tall and the parchment was incinerated."

"So we had to resort to our original plan. The Aging potions."

"Which worked brilliantly, mind you..."

"Until you stepped past the line?" Hermione spoke up, again.

"No, my dear Hermione, that's not right at all!" said George, beaming.

"For once, the smartest witch of our generation is quite incorrect," said Fred, with an equally bright smile.

"We were flung across the Great Hall before we even managed to put a foot over the line."

"After which we began growing these beards."

"Which, I have to say, is attracting much more attention from the ladies," said Fred, wiggling his eyebrows.

"I dare say, who knew all these girls preferred the mature look?" Both the twins laughed and ran off to tell their story to other people in the Gryffindor common room.

Back in her serious expression, Hermione asked, "So where were you when all this happened?"

Harry replied, "Down the hall, behind a suit of armour. When they got thrown back, a bunch of teachers started moving towards the Great Hall. They've got some kind of system to alert the staff. I was worried about Moody the most- you remember what he did to the twins last time, right?" Hermione nodded.

"Well, I looked for his dot specifically. It stayed in his office. Mr. Crouch came instead."

"Wait, the head of International Cooperations?"

"Yeah, but when I saw the dot step into the hallway, I set off the distraction. I was expecting to see Crouch, but I saw Moody instead."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What? You're sure about that?"

"Yeah, I looked back at the map just to be sure. Mr. Crouch was impersonating Moody for some reason. Moody was still in his office."

"But why would he have to disguise himself? He has every right to be here, doesn't he? He could have just showed up in person..."

"I'm not sure, but I found out from Professor McGonagall later that Mr. Crouch was supposed to be at a meeting with the Headmasters of all three schools that night."

"Maybe the map was wrong?" Hermione suggested doubtfully.

"It's never been wrong before. It could tell where Peter Pettigrew was even though he was in his rat form."

They sat in silence, pondering what to do. Finally, Hermione said half-heartedly, "I think we might have to do what Professor Flitwick said never to do."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean we'll have to confront him directly about it."

Harry served only one night of detention with Professor McGonagall for his part in the twins' attempt at sneaking their names into the Goblet of Fire. During that time, his mind was whirling over the possibility of trying to stand face to face with Moody. That man was scary. Even with the little bit of duelling training he was getting with Hermione, he knew he'd be completely outclassed by someone who'd made it his career to take down dark wizards. What if he had to duel Moody alone? He wouldn't even survive the first hit! Even if he did, that crazy eye of his would track him as he tried to run away. The prospect of actually confronting Moody was getting crazier and crazier.

Hermione was the one who brought him back down to earth. "We don't have to duel him, you silly. We just have to ask him a few questions. Maybe when the other staff are around. All you really have to do is a tiny bit of Legilimency to see if he's lying or not," she explained. "Although it probably wouldn't hurt to have our wands in hand and ready to cast a Protego though," she added.

They decided it would be safest if they talked to Moody during breakfast, while most of the other staff members were present. Dumbledore's presence alone might make all the difference. They would ask a simple question regarding that particular night, and Harry would concentrate on some surface Legilimency to see if Moody was lying. Of course, someone as paranoid as Moody would undoubtedly have some of the strongest Occlumency shields, but Harry just hoped he'd still be able to detect deception through them.

The next morning, they had a short, light breakfast. Glancing at the map, they made sure it was Moody sitting at the table instead of Crouch. Nodding to each other, they got up from the bench and approached the staff table. Harry gripped his wand in his pocket,

ready to draw it at a moment's notice. Hermione had her wand up her left sleeve, fingering the handle with her right hand as they approached. Moody took a swig from his hip-flask as they approached. He eyed the two students that stood in front of him, one eye on each. It was extremely unnerving how he did that.

"Got your hands on your wands already, eh? I'm glad somebody's taking my lessons to heart," he guffawed in a low, throaty growl. The rest of the staff table turned to stare at Harry and Hermione as he said that.

"Planning on attacking a Professor, Potter?" snarled Snape. "Your current fame just isn't enough for you, is it? You just have to find a way to get your name into that Goblet..."

"Please, Severus. Mr. Potter has yet to state his intentions," Dumbledore told the Potions professor.

"Is this about what you told me the night you aided the twins? I can assure you..." McGonagall began.

Harry was unprepared for the sudden flurry of questions and accusations from the staff table. It made him a little more nervous, but when Hermione squeezed his arm, it firmed his resolve. "Professor Moody, I'd just like to ask you a few questions," he stated, looking at Moody directly.

"Ask away, my boy." Moody gave a mean grin, while the rest of the staff suddenly quieted down and watched with keen interest.

"Where were you when the twins set off the alarms around the Goblet?"

"In my office, of course," came the reply. Harry knew that was the truth, but decided to test the mental waters anyways. He pushed lightly with his Legilimency.

"Were you alone at the time?"

"Of course I was," came his answer. Harry felt a mental flicker coming from Moody. Harry never imagined how easy it would be to detect lies on someone like Moody. Trying his luck, he pushed a little deeper, and received a few images. Moody was sitting at his

desk, looking at an empty room. He hadn't seen anyone, but... something felt off.

"Are you sure?" The moment he asked the question, the images in Moody's mind focused on the various dark detectors Moody had strewn about the room. Half of them were broken, and the other half seemed to be going off. Suddenly, Harry heard an unfamiliar voice boom within Moody's mindscape, "You must be alone in your office every night." The images of the dark detectors faded instantly.

"Yes," came the reply from Moody. "I'm always alone in my office every night." Harry felt absolutely nothing when Moody gave the reply. No truth, no lies- it was as if he was following an order without any feeling.

What on earth was that? thought Harry. Something was clearly wrong about what he just sensed. He decided to focus on Moody's dark detectors. "Sir, do you make a regular habit of ignoring all the dark detectors you've set up around your office?" Once again, Harry saw a quick flash of the images of Moody's instruments, before the strange voice boomed again, "You must keep my existence a secret."

"There weren't any sensors going off, Mr. Potter," growled Moody. Harry felt the conflict inside Moody's head. Clear lie, thought Harry. He had to be getting close. Harry felt his heart thumping while his breathing quickened. His palms felt sweaty. He knew it would be tricky, but he had to expose Moody somehow. Who was giving him these orders? he wondered. He then realized it could be the perfect question. He looked at Hermione, giving a small nod which meant "get ready."

"Whose existence must you keep secret, Professor Moody? Who keeps giving you orders?" Harry heard the voice again, booming louder than ever, "YOU MUST KEEP MY EXISTENCE A SECRET." Harry sensed extreme conflict within Moody, as if he was fighting against himself. That was the only warning he received before Moody whipped out his wand, the tip already glowing with a spell ready to fly.

The next few seconds dragged out like hours as the adrenaline burst hit. Harry ducked down as fast as he could, pulling Hermione with him. The first spell missed his head by inches, but Moody's wand

wasn't stopping. He tried pulling his wand out of his pocket, but it was twisted in an awkward position as he crouched. Hermione whipped hers out of her sleeve, immediately casting a Protego charm with all her might, just in time to block Moody's second spell. The force of it shattered the shield and threw Hermione several feet back, as she landed on the Hufflepuff table. Harry felt a rush of blind rage when he saw Hermione go flying, second only to his fear that she could be dead. Staying low, he cast the most powerful banishing charm he could at Moody's fake leg. He rolled away from the staff table towards Hermione as the metallic leg flew off of Moody's body and bounced along the back walls. Concentrating on his most powerful shield held behind him, he rushed to his beloved's aid.

Meanwhile, the staff were completely surprised by the sudden attack by Moody. Several watched in shock as Moody launched a silent Obliviate at Harry, followed by a Bludgeoner at Hermione. Dumbledore and Hagrid were the first to react. Right after he had struck Hermione, Moody quickly began animating the tablecloth, which moved to envelope Harry. Dumbledore cancelled the animation while Hagrid used his massive arms to reach right across Professor McGonagall and slam down on Moody's wand. Moody dodged Hagrid's enormous fist, which slammed down on the table, cracking it at the point of impact. Professor Flitwick had somehow moved from the far end of the table and was running on top of it, throwing several immobilization and restraining jinxes at Moody. Completely ignoring Flitwick, he was about to cast another spell at Harry when his leg flew from underneath him, flipping him over as it rocketed away from his body. Dumbledore quickly had him stunned and bound, and removed his wand.

"Yeh alrigh' there, 'Arry?" Hagrid bounded over to Harry.

"I'm fine, Hagrid. It's Hermione..." Harry was cradling her in his arms.

"Oh, stop worrying, Harry... I'll be fine after a visit to the infirmary." Hermione said weakly. She coughed a few times. "Ok, maybe I'll have to stay overnight, but it's not too bad."

"I'm so sorry for putting you through this, Hermione. I never should have brought you into a situation like this."

"Don't be ridiculous. It was my idea in the first place, in case you don't remember."

"Mr. Potter! Miss Granger! Please, come to the infirmary immediately. You can let her go, Mr. Potter, I'll levitate her myself." Madam Pomfrey had made her way from the broken staff table to where the two of them lay. They were quickly escorted away from the shocked stares from the entire student body.

Amelia Bones never would have imagined herself in this position. She was interrogating her own mentor, the legendary Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody. The only reason she received the position of Head of Magical Law Enforcement was that Moody himself had turned it down several times. Where should she even start? Facing the grizzled, veteran auror sitting in front of her, she fell back to basic training.

"Well, Alastor Moody, you have the right to legal counsel before answering any questions..."

"Amelia, quit dillydallying and give me the Veritaserum already," growled Moody. "I've taught you to trust nothing less, and even then, have your doubts to the veracity of the answers."

She only just managed to resist answering with "Yes, sir" as she ordered a vial of Veritaserum to be brought in. Giving Moody the standard dose of three drops, she began the standard interrogation.

"What is your full name?"

"Alastor Maddox Moody."

"Why did you attack Harry Potter and Hermione Granger this morning?"

"I was under the Imperius curse to protect the identity of the one who cast the curse on me. Harry Potter demonstrated that he knew I was under Imperius."

Who on earth could possibly keep Moody under the Imperius? He could break the Imperius of anyone in the DMLE, thought Bones. They must have been close by, if he acted before he could break it. "How long were you under the curse?"

"Since August 24th, when somebody broke into my home."

The head of the DMLE was floored. Somebody had managed to keep Moody under an Imperius for one and a half months? She had to know what kind of wizard that was. "Who cast the Imperius on you?"

"I don't know."

"Why were you unable to throw off the curse?"

"I was stunned during the attack on my home. I believe I was forced to drink will-weakening potion before the Imperius curse was cast. One of the first commands given to me was to drink some more, and always take another dose at least once every eight hours from my hip-flask." Immediately, Madam Bones told one of her aurors to get the DMLE's resident potions master and have him analyze the contents of the hip flask.

"What other orders have you been given through the Imperius?"

"Act as normally as possible. Do not attempt to discover the identity of my curser. Ensure I am alone in my office every night before bed. Keep the identity of my curser a secret. Drink a sleeping draught each night before bed. Keep the fifth compartment of my trunk unlocked. Continue brewing will-weakening and sleeping potions in secret. Allow myself to be stunned."

Amelia couldn't make heads or tails of the commands. For now, the only thing she could think of doing was to investigate Moody's trunk, which she ordered another subordinate to do. The rest of the orders all seemed to be centered around concealing the identity of Moody's attacker. This would be a tough case to crack.

"Amelia, the Veritaserum's wearing off," Moody informed her. "Any last questions?"

"When was the last order given to you?"

"Four days ago, the night Harry Potter was questioning me about," Moody answered, with the gruff vigor returning to his voice. The Veritaserum had completely worn off. "Amelia, let me be frank with you. I have no idea what their objective was, but if I had to guess, it's assassination."

"What makes you say that? Who's the target?" asked Amelia.

"I don't know, but since I was assigned to be the head of security for the Triwizard Tournament, that could mean anyone from Dumbledore to the Minister of Magic in Bulgaria. There's going to be plenty of officials that will attend the event over the course of the year. My guess is I was supposed to be a sleeper agent."

"This is a disaster, Moody. We can't cancel the event now, Fudge won't hear of it. It would be an international scandal. We'll need additional security for all the officials and VIPs who are attending..."

"Not just that, Amelia. You're going to have to redo the entire security protocol. I don't remember giving the plans out, but that doesn't mean I haven't been obliterated while I was imperiused or something like that. Security's been compromised. Start from scratch. I'd like you, or one of your most trustworthy Aurors, to take over the management of the entire event. There's no way I can continue on as the head of security for the Triwizard. I'm a liability now."

Amelia Bones nodded. Moody may have been paranoid, but that certainly wasn't without reason. And this time, he had plenty of reasons to be as paranoid as possible. There were less than three short weeks before the Choosing of the Champions. She'd need to begin her work as quickly as possible.

Harry Potter sat on his usual infirmary bed, rather surprised he had come out of the fight with nothing more than a few scratches. He refused to lie down; instead, he held Hermione's hand as she lay on the bed next to him. She smiled before drinking a dose of Skele-Gro, then winced. Harry knew how disgusting the potion was. At least she only needed one small dose to heal a few of her ribs, instead of having to regrow an entire arm.

"You know, I think Malfoy might have had the right idea in Defense..." Harry began.

"What are you talking about?"

"A wand holster. Obviously he was too stupid to use his properly, but I got my wand caught inside my pants pocket. I needed to be faster. You saved me, Hermione."

"You were faster, though. You ducked out of the way of the spell before I realized what was going on. You just needed to have your wand in a better position."

"Which is why I'm going to owl Ollivander's to see if he sells any wand holsters as soon as we get out of here. You saved me with that Protego, Hermione."

"I saw you coming to my rescue as soon as I got knocked down, you know. My knight in shining armour." She gave a devilish grin.

"Oh, do you expect me to carry you off on a white horse, now?" Harry started joking.

"No, I want a unicorn." Hermione was giggling now.

"My love, you know that men can't ride unicorns. How about an Abraxan? I'd steal one from Beauxbatons just for you."

"Oh, my very own Bellopheron!" Hermione placed the back of her hand on her forehead in a mock swoon. The two of them couldn't stop themselves from laughing.

"They do say laughter is the best medicine, although I won't doubt dear Poppy's potions," came a grandfatherly voice from the foot of the bed. The headmaster had walked into the room while they were joking around. "Mr. Potter, I do have a few questions to ask of you, if you don't mind."

"About Moody, you mean? Ask away."

"How did you come to suspect Moody was... shall we say, compromised?"

"It was on the night of the twins' attempt at the Goblet, Headmaster. I was on lookout for the twins, when I saw Moody approaching, but it wasn't actually him." Harry answered evasively, trying not to give away the secret of the Marauder's Map.

"I believe Professor McGonagall told me a very similar story to yours, Harry. However, she did say you suspected the person in disguise was Bartemius Crouch. Why did you name him in particular?"

Harry knew there was no getting away from this one. "Err... well, I have a special map, you see. It shows the location of everyone in the castle, labelled with their names. The dot labelled Bartemius Crouch was approaching, but it was definitely Moody's body."

"Harry, I have to inform you that I, along with Madam Maxime, Headmaster Karkaroff, and Minister Fudge were all meeting with Director Crouch that evening. We passed through several security checks within the ministry and he never left the meeting, not even for a bathroom break. He couldn't have been in the castle at the time."

"But... the map's never been wrong before..."

"Harry, could I see the map? Do you have it with you?" Dumbledore eyed him with a keen interest as Harry pulled the map out.

"To activate it, you have to tap it with your wand and say 'I solemnly swear I am up to no good.'"

Dumbledore said the words, and a brief look of surprise passed over his face. He then watched the map for a minute before casting a few diagnostic spells, turning the piece of parchment over several times in his hands.

"Harry, do you know how this map works?"

"Err... I'm not sure." He quickly glanced at Hermione, who also shook her head and shrugged. "I'm guessing there's a bunch of tracking charms and some kind of identity charm on it..."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Unfortunately, it's not nearly as powerful or complex as you imagine. It's quite ingenious in its simplicity, actually. All it does is read some of the information pulled from the Hogwarts wards and display it on the parchment. Most of the charms here are simply self-writing and animated-ink spells, along with the password security."

"Oh... I had no idea. What does that mean for me, though?" asked Harry. He couldn't quite see where the Headmaster was going with this.

"It means that the map could easily be subverted. I doubt that most intruders would know to specifically mask themselves from a rather specialized device like this, but for one who had a hand in its creation, and was caught by the very same map last year..."

"Wormtail!" Harry nearly shouted. Thinking about the escaped rat boiled his blood. He desperately wanted to catch him... chase him down as the little sneak tried to run... dive down from above and snatch the little rodent in his talons...

Dumbledore's voice snapped him out of his short, emotional daydream. "Harry, don't worry yourself over this. I think I shall make my own version of this map to keep in my office... with a few personal improvements, of course. You can have yours back. Don't worry, we'll be on the lookout for him from now on."

"Uh, yes, sir."

"Oh, you and Miss Granger can take twenty-five points each for displaying extraordinary courage and a strong sense of justice by standing up to Professor Moody. You can also take an additional twenty-five points each for an excellently performed shield charms and banishing charms against a veteran magical combatant." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily as he strode out of the infirmary.

Over the next week, Harry and Hermione were both getting awed looks from students. Nobody was crazy enough to take on Mad-Eye, and certainly few had enough confidence to even survive a duel against him. Even several of the Durmstrang students, all of whom were very powerful sixth and seventh year students, were impressed and smiling at them as they passed in the hallways. Evidently, stories of Moody's skill and power had spread over as far as eastern Europe, despite most of his work occurring in Britain and occasionally the west coast of the continent. The only Hogwarts students brave enough to approach them were their friends, who congratulated them on a spectacular display. The only student bold, or stupid, enough to actually get on his nerves was the one Draco Malfoy.

"It's a shame Moody didn't hit a bit harder, he could have ridded the world of one more Mud-"

He never managed to finish that sentence. Harry used the same powerful banishing charm on Draco, blasting him straight into Goyle, who was standing right behind him, smashing both of them into a broom closet. Vincent Crabbe stood there in shock, overwhelmed by the raw display of power, frozen like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. The crowd around them were silent for a while, but then many of the Gryffindors and Durmstrang students began applauding. Several others followed suit.

Fred and George looked at each other and nodded. Fred ran into the broom closet where Malfoy and Goyle still lay, unconscious. George grabbed Harry's shoulder and whispered, "Don't worry, Harry, we'll take care of this." He quickly joined his brother and began transfiguring Malfoy's robes.

Apparently, Viktor Krum was one of the witnesses. He walked up to Harry, offering his hand. "I am sorry I did not introduce myself properly at party. I am Viktor Krum. You are Harry Potter, yes?"

Harry took his hand and shook it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Krum."

"I must admit I was getting wrong impression of you. You are very famous, even in Bulgaria, and you are rich, much like little blonde boy." Viktor smirked. "But you are not like little boy, you fight like real man. You show real strength. Durmstrang would be happy to have student like you."

Harry nodded, accepting the compliment. "Thank you, Mr. Krum. I'm glad there are pure-blooded wizards who strive to be more than just an heir to a name."

"Yes, names are meaningless when faced with skill. I hear you are also very skilled with broom, best in school yes?"

Harry nodded. "I'm a seeker, like you. Although I have to admit I'm nowhere near your skill level. I was at the World Cup, and I think just watching you play taught me a lot."

Krum laughed. "We must play sometime, then. Perhaps at end of year, after I win Tournament, yes?"

Harry chuckled with him. "Yes, I'd love that. I'll be cheering for the Hogwarts champion, though, but good luck to you too, Mr. Krum."

As the group of Durmstrang students walked away, Harry turned around to see what the twins had been up to. Draco's robes had been turned a rather frilly pink, and the twins had sprouted hickeys all over his neck. Goyle had received similar treatment. "Come on, let's try to find Colin and his camera before any professors get here..." Fred suggested, as they both scurried away.

Harry managed to get away with only one weekend of detention, as nobody wanted to cross Harry after that. All the students, save the Slytherins, testified that it was Malfoy who had provoked the attack. Even some of the Durmstrang students took pleasure in mocking what they saw as the weakest house in Hogwarts. The twins were quick to accept their share of the blame, using the publicity to drum up a bit more excitement for their WWW products, and try to sell photos of the incident in question.

Professor Moody returned to Hogwarts after a week away. After several serious interrogations and medical checkups, the investigators at the DMLE determined he was still the Light-oriented, retired Auror they all knew, with no lingering effects or other deeply hidden orders from the Imperius curse. The investigators still couldn't determine the identity of the infiltrator, and as Peter Pettigrew was still officially listed as deceased, none of them could take Dumbledore's advice to investigate that lead. Moody's suggestion that there would be a possible assassination attempt was the most likely, and they began stationing extra Aurors at Hogsmeade, with two patrolling the Hogwarts grounds itself at all times. Kingsley Shacklebolt was now directing security around the Triwizard Tournament, and was doing a fairly good job for someone who had only two weeks to redo everything before the champions would be chosen. Moody, taking caution to the extreme, had suggested that he not return to Hogwarts at all, but since there were no more traces of any influences on his will, and since Dumbledore couldn't find a replacement Defense professor in time, he agreed to return to his teaching post.

Some of the students had heard the rumours. Mad-Eye Moody was under the Imperius the whole time by some dark wizard. Some held hope that his brutal style of teaching was a reflection of the one controlling him. Most of them enjoyed the one-week break without defense classes. They waited for the return of their teacher, the first day classes would resume, hoping to see a change in personality from their professor. As Moody walked into the room, he immediately began tossing silent full-body-binds at the class. Tables and chairs bounced as bodies in a seated position suddenly snapped straight as a plank and fell to the floor. Harry and Hermione, who had learned quickly from the experience at breakfast a week ago, both quickly snapped their wands up from their holsters. Unlike Malfoy, who had arrogantly purchased a professional's wand-holster that simply threw the wand into the caster's hand, they bought the beginner's model, which snapped it upwards and held it at their palms. It wasn't quite as fast or as flexible to use, but it did let them grip their wands easily despite the chaos. They protected themselves with the shield charm.

"Good job, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. Glad to see you two didn't let your skills waste away like the rest of the class," grunted Moody. To the rest of the class, he barked, "One week, and that's all it takes for you to soften like sponges. What have I been teaching you? Constant vigilance!" He began pacing across the room.

"Even with my skill and security measures, I was still captured by a Dark wizard and placed under an Imperius. How do you maggots think you'll do out in the real world? This is Defense Against the Dark Arts, and none of you managed to put up any defences, other than Mr. Potter and Miss Granger here. It looks like I'm going to have to push all of you even harder to get it into your thick skulls. Why are you still sitting there without your wands in your hands?" When he shouted the last line, the half of the class that was still empty-handed scrambled for their wands while desperately trying to dodge the unending stream of stinging hexes coming from Moody. It was going to be a very, very long year.

After class, Harry and Hermione stayed behind. "Mr. Potter, Miss Granger. I'm glad you two managed to free me from that damned curse. You certainly seem to take my advice to heart, probably even more so than the rest of the staff here." Moody chuckled in amusement, which came out as more like a throaty rumble of a

revving motor. "I'd like to thank you for what you managed to do for me, but I'm not quite sure what I can offer you."

The two students looked at each other, unsure of what to make of his offer. Tentatively, Harry asked, "Well, we both know you're quite skilled at combat, sir. Could you teach us some? Last week when we fought, we both managed to do little more than raise our shields, and the other staff members took care of the rest."

Moody roared in laughter. "You really take your security to heart, don't you? Splendid idea, lad. How about a spot of training each weekend? Meet me at the edge of the Forbidden Forest after breakfast on Saturday."

Harry and Hermione both nodded. "That sounds perfect, sir."

"Oh, and let me give you an old Auror's training handbook, circa 1950. It's better than the ones they use today, in my opinion. They lowered the entry requirements in the 70's to get more recruits to fight Voldemort, but didn't bother raising them again. It should tide you over if you have any extra spare time. Follow the exercise regime if you can."

Hermione leapt at the chance to read the book. They were never given to the general public, and to be able to learn a few tricks from law enforcement itself was a rare opportunity. They were completely finished with the first duelling book they had purchased over the summer and had begun work on the second. Still, both books focused on formal, rule-enforced duelling, and the auror's handbook would give them much better advice in real combat situations. They thanked their professor, and began reading the book that very evening.

Chapter 12: The Fourth One

Ron and Neville found them both sitting on the common room couch, flipping through their newly acquired book. Harry and Hermione both had the feeling they'd read it before, as everything seemed more like a review than new information. There was a lot of mostly-useless information, like proper uniform for formal events, the different salutes, or correct methods of filing a report. There were several chapters of that before they got to the heart of the matter- squad tactics, paired combat, solo combat, and tactics for many common violent "incidents." There was also an entire reconnaissance section, which dealt with privacy charms, eavesdropping charms, disillusionment and silencing charms, as well as psychological tricks. They were wary about whether or not they should learn and practice the "muggle management" section, but Hermione suggested, in her wisdom, it was better to know them and not use them than the other way around. Before they were even halfway through reading the book, Harry and Hermione agreed- being an Auror was hard work. No wonder the training program was three years long, with almost half of the applicants dropping out before finishing.

"Hey you two. You two have taken to sharing a book now? Why don't you use that book you got for Hermione's birthday?" asked Neville.

They turned to each other for a second with blank looks. Hermione ran upstairs to grab her Library Tome. While she was upstairs, Harry answered Neville. "Err, we were kind of excited about this one. We both just wanted to read it right away."

"What's so exciting about it? It looks like it's falling apart," said Ron. It was true, as many of the pages were tattered and the bindings were loose. At least there weren't any pages missing.

"It's an old version of the Auror's handbook. Moody prefers it to the modern version, actually," Harry answered. "It's got lots of useful information in it."

Just then, Hermione came back downstairs with her special tome, and they immediately copied the book. Hermione immediately began reading the handbook on the much nicer tome. Harry held out the old, tattered version and offered to Neville and Ron, "You guys want to take a look?"

"I'd love to!" Neville exclaimed, taking the handbook from Harry and sitting on a seat next to them. "My... my parents were aurors... I'd like to know a bit more about them..." He suddenly went quiet as he stared at the book in his hands.

"Maybe you could ask Moody about them? I'm sure they fought together in the last war..." Harry suggested. "He's also offered to train us in magical combat on Saturday mornings."

"Whoa! Moody's going to train you guys personally?" Ron had nothing but astonishment in his face. "Can I come too? What time in the morning?"

Neville was a bit hesitant, but upon seeing Ron's enthusiasm, followed his lead. "I'd like to try, too..." he said half-heartedly.

"What time did he say, exactly?" Harry asked Hermione.

Recalling the conversation, she answered, "He just said 'after breakfast.'"

"Oh, good," said Ron. "Breakfast on Saturdays goes until eleven. That's perfect!"

Harry frowned. "I get the feeling he meant after his breakfast, Ron."

Hermione got the same idea. "And I don't think Moody is the type to sleep in. Breakfast is served as early as seven on weekends..."

Ron's face fell. He was completely conflicted between the idea of waking up earlier on a weekend and getting training to be a magical combatant, one of the few things that none of his brothers had mastered. Bill was excellent with runes and wards, Charlie was fantastic at both Quidditch and beast-handling, Percy was a suck-up who managed paperwork well, the twins were excellent at potions and transfiguration... Ron had yet to find his own specialty. Other than chess, of course. He resolved to get up early on Saturday to see if Moody would train him as well.

The weekend took far too long to arrive, and when the first ray of light shone through the windows of the boys' dorm, Harry and

Neville bounded out of bed. Ron was still fast asleep. Neville said, "I'll get him up, Harry."

Harry nodded, moving to the bathroom for a quick shower. Once he was clean and changed, he strode out the door, noticing that Neville had, somehow, managed to get Ron to flip around his bed with his feet at his pillows, but without managing to wake him up. "Aguamenti helps a lot, Neville," he advised his roommate as he left.

Harry and Hermione made their way down to the Great Hall, glad to see that Moody was still eating when they arrived. They nodded to him as they sat down and began their own breakfast. No more than five minutes later, Moody had finished and was walking out the doors, giving them only a quick glance before he did. Harry quickly gulped down some pumpkin juice and wrapped some sausage in napkins, while Hermione grabbed a few slices of toast. As they had hoped, they ran into Neville, who was dragging Ron, as they left the Great Hall.

"Here, guys. We got you a spot of breakfast," Harry said, handing Neville the sausage.

"What? I get up at this ungodly hour and you don't even let me eat a pr...oommwph," cried Ron, before Hermione shoved the toast she was holding in his mouth.

"Be quiet, Ronald. You didn't get up at all, from what I heard. Neville did all the work," she scolded. "Just be glad we saved you some breakfast at all."

Professor Moody could move very quickly, despite his peg leg. Harry and Hermione were only a few second behind him in leaving the Great Hall, but the short meeting with Neville and Ron nearly made them lose sight of the old auror. Running past Hagrid's hut, Hermione stopped all of them. "I think we should have our wands ready."

Everyone suddenly tensed up. That was certainly Moody's style. They took out their wands and continued moving towards the edge of the forest, slowly. Suddenly seeing some movement from the forest, they turned to face what they expected to be Moody, but it turned out to be a small, blonde girl who wasn't paying much attention to them. They approached her carefully, and Neville was

the first to recognize who she was. "That's Luna Lovegood. She's a Ravenclaw... I've seen her talking to the plants in the greenhouses when I work there."

Both Harry and Hermione were once again struck by unclear images when they heard Luna's name. She was practicing spellwork with them. She was fighting a battle in an unfamiliar place... they were back to back, defending each other. She was trustworthy, and they had to make sure she was their friend. Harry quickly walked up to her and extended his hand. "I'm Harry Potter. You're Luna Lovegood, right?"

Luna turned to look at Harry, and then appeared to inspect the air around him before replying, "Yes, you're a very interesting one." She took his hand, turning it back and forth like she was looking for something on his palm, and smiled. She then just stared at Harry, which unnerved him. He was expecting weird from her, but the problem with expecting weird is that your own mind has to be weird enough to anticipate all the possibilities.

Hermione greeted her to break the tension, asking, "What brings you out to the forest so early in the morning, Luna?"

Luna inspected her the same way, except she grabbed Hermione's hand and held it towards the sun, watching the rays slip past her fingers. "Yes," she said, "You did."

"Excuse me?" Hermione was confused by the girl's actions, and then thrown completely off by her words.

"The blibbering humdingers were saying you two kept things very interesting for them. They never know what to expect now that you're now instead of then, but don't worry, they like it when things are interesting. They told me it might be fun to meet you here today," answered Luna. She then smiled at Hermione, as if expecting her to ask another question. It took Hermione a minute to recover.

"Wait, what do you mean? What are blibbering humdingers? They talk to you?" Hermione had trouble figuring out what to ask first.

"Of course! They like to hang around you two especially, because things are never the same twice, but you two aren't even the same once. They like to blabber a lot, so that's why they're called

blibbering humdingers. They're much better to talk to than the blubbering ones," answered Luna, matter-of-factly.

Harry was just staring at her in utter confusion. Ron was whispering to Neville about "Loony." Hermione took another two minutes to finally comprehend what Luna might have been talking about. She probably could have figured it out faster if Luna wasn't staring at her the whole time, in an eerily serene manner. She pulled Harry close, and said, "I think she might know something about the time travel."

"How's that possible? Nobody knows about it except us..."

"Maybe it's got something to do with those blabbing hummers or..."

"Blibbering Humdingers," interrupted Luna, who apparently had overheard their whispers. "Oh, do be careful." She grabbed Ron's arm and pulled him, just as they noticed a streak of red light fly from what seemed to be an empty part of the grass in front of the forest. Ron fell in front of Luna and got hit by the spell, instantly falling unconscious on the ground. Harry, Hermione, and Neville quickly had their wands pointing at a now-visible shimmer from the field.

"Did you forget you were supposed to be meeting me?" asked Moody, who suddenly appeared as he cancelled the disillusionment spell. "One little girl is all it takes for you to let your guard down, eh? Thought I taught you all better than that." Turning to Luna, he said, "Can't say the same about you, although I wouldn't recommend using your own friends as shields."

"I wouldn't either," replied Luna simply.

Professor Moody only hesitated slightly at her response before reviving Ron. "Well, Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, I do recall saying that I would give you two lessons in magical combat, but I not these other three. I suppose you're all interested?"

Ron and Neville nodded, while Luna asked, "Magical combat? That sounds interesting. Could I join in too?"

Ron protested, "What? But she's not our friend. She's not even a Gryffindor! What's she doing here anyways?"

Hermione felt an overwhelming need to protect Luna, and stepped in between them. "For your information, Ronald, we're perfectly fine with making new friends, even if you aren't." Turning to Luna, she said, "You're welcome to join us, Luna, if Professor Moody is willing to teach us."

"That I am, but don't expect me to slow down for your sakes. I'm jumping right into the advanced material, which I'm pretty sure you and Mr. Potter can handle, given what I've seen of your talents. The rest of you will have to catch up on your own time if you can't handle it."

When they all agreed, Moody began the first lesson. "I have to say I'm impressed with your skill in the mental arts, lad. I may have been under will-weakening potion at the time, but for any fourteen-year-old to know legilimency can be quite an advantage in battle. I take it this means you have occlumency shields as well?"

Harry, Hermione, and Neville nodded, while Ron frowned. Luna just continued her serene gaze at the old professor. "Right, I'm going to check every one of you for your occlumency first. Weasley, you're first."

After a few seconds of staring, Ron asked, "Err... what's happening?"

Moody snorted in disapproval. "You haven't got any shields at all, do you, boy? You couldn't even tell that I was in your mind. I even found the memory where your friends here tried to teach you occlumency, so why haven't you practiced?"

"I... er... it didn't seem like much use...?" stammered Ron, clearly fearing his Defense professor.

"Well, now you know, don't you? Get practicing!" barked Moody, as he moved on to Luna. "You didn't say you practiced occlumency either, did you?" He entered her mind, expecting something similar to Ron's. What he found was, instead, memories mashed together, and he couldn't figure out whether they were real, fake, or what was one or another. He tried to concentrate on a simple memory like her first class with him, but instead received an image of a half-giant, Lockhart-faced werewolf teaching potions with a hippogriff, outside of Hogwarts with the sun shining in the middle of the night. Even

though he knew exactly what the memory should have been, every time he stripped away inconsistencies the memory mutated. He then tried to tap into her memory of breakfast that morning, but received an image of her cooking bacon in a cauldron in front of a greasy bat, while a flaming horse lay underneath providing the heat. The bacon smelled like chocolate, and the heat from the flames felt like being pricked by a cactus. He pulled out in utter confusion. "Well, although I have to say you don't have any shields... you might not need them," he grunted to Luna. Harry, Hermione, and Neville looked at Luna, wondering what Moody meant.

"You're next," he said, walking in front of Neville. Upon entering his mind, Moody found himself standing outside of a glass dome, with many plants inside, obviously representing various memories. Neville had yet to pack all his memories inside the dome, although the several trivial memories were sprouting on the ground around him. Moody inspected them, ensuring there was nothing important outside the defences. He found random things like how Neville always put on his right shoe first each morning, as well as a few assorted memories from the last day that Neville had yet to sort. He hammered at the dome until it was about to crack, and saw the strain on Neville's face at keeping his mind intact. He pulled back before he broke through completely. "Not too shabby, lad. It'll hold off just about everyone who's skimming for memories, and you can probably hold off a serious attacker for a minute. Keep working on it."

He checked Harry next. "What in hell's flaming nursery is that thing?" he exclaimed. Moody was rarely ever surprised, but finding himself inside Harry's mind, faced with an interstellar battleship, certainly took him for a loop. It was huge, it was mean, and when every turret pointed in his direction, Moody knew it was a threat, even if he didn't understand exactly what they were.

"It's a Seige Perilous class destroyer. I read about it when I was on vacation with Hermione," answered Harry with a smile. He knew that if he could catch Moody off guard, he'd be able to throw off nearly any wizard. "Pew Pew!" he added.

Moody suddenly pulled out of Harry's mind as the spaceship fired its lasers. "Well, I have to say your mind is pretty well defended, lad." Harry smirked, knowing that Moody wasn't aware that the spaceship

was only defending trivial memories, and his important ones were tucked away even deeper.

"Alright, Miss Granger. Let's see if yours is as good as Harry's." Entering her mind, he found himself in complete darkness. Moving around felt difficult and disorienting. He only had a few seconds to attempt to search for any memories before he was wrapped up in scaly, spiky tentacles, pulling him towards a gigantic, razor-toothed jaw. He struggled to get out of the mindscape just in time. "I have a feeling you let me go, Miss Granger. I dare say you're even more aggressive than Mr. Potter here. What was that creature?"

"Oh, I saw a few documentaries on creatures of the deepest parts of the ocean, and I started combining aspects of several into one big monster. There's bits of a giant squid, anglerfish, some giant isopod, jellyfish stingers, and a few other animals mashed together. Oh, and when I need to it can also provide a very soothing light show," Hermione said proudly. She was showing quite a bit of restraint not describing each individual animal in detail.

"That's very good. Mr. Weasley, you've got a lot of catching up to do." Moody began. "Now, how have you been practicing?"

"We meditate and work on organizing our minds, and then Harry and I test each other through Legilimency. We help with Neville as well," Hermione answered.

"So you've never practiced it during classes?" Moody asked. They all shook their heads. "Or while flying your brooms?" Harry and Hermione shook their heads again in mild embarrassment. "You need to keep your defences up all the time! That means mental defences as well as your wands!"

"Now, we're going to have a quick little duel right now. If you can't keep me from reading your thoughts in the middle of a fight, you'll have no chance of even hitting me. Potter, you're first."

For the next several hours, all the way until lunch, they strained to keep their mental shields up continuously as Moody always seemed to hobble an inch out of the path of their spells every time, while tossing several of his own back at them. Luna seemed to be the only one who had any chance of hitting the professor, being completely unpredictable to him. Unfortunately, there was still no way for her to

win as her spells were relatively weak, easily being absorbed or deflected by Moody's shield. Ron, of course, didn't have a chance as Moody walked closer and closer to him while dodging every spell until he got close enough to rap Ron on the head with his cane.

"Here's what you need to practice for next week. Keep your occlumency up every moment you're awake. Don't wait for someone to intrude before you throw up your defences. Hopefully by next week you'll be used to it, and we can begin on the offensive."

The next two weeks were extremely tiring, to put it lightly. They practiced keeping their mindscapes up continuously, sorting memories as soon as they gained them, all Sunday long. By midday Harry and Hermione were peaked, but right when they sat down for lunch, they could feel Moody suddenly hammer them with a legilimency probe from the staff table. He certainly wasn't going easy on them. Harry and Hermione realized it was much more difficult for them to keep their defences up than Neville, mostly because theirs were far more complex. Harry thought of simplifying it again, but Hermione insisted they keep practicing with the defences they had, hoping it would get easier with more practice. She was right, since on Monday they could last at least past lunch, and by Friday they could hold it until dinner.

Out of curiosity, Hermione asked Luna if she would allow her to perform legilimency to find out what Moody was talking about. She came out of it completely baffled, wondering if it was possible for them to emulate it. Harry had to perform legilimency on Luna himself because Hermione couldn't quite describe what she saw, and he was equally confused. They realized manipulating their own memories was a lot of work, and to have them mashed together as bizarrely as Luna did would take a lot of effort for them. Luna, however, seemed to organize her mind this way naturally.

Ron decided to drop the extra lessons after the next Saturday, deciding that given the amount of catching up he needed to do with Occlumency, combined with the loss of a day of sleeping in, was too much. Luna, however, had gladly joined them the following week. Moody taught Neville and Luna the basics of Legilimency, while Harry and Hermione attempted to figure out which spells each one was going to cast before they cast it using some surface scanning. Holding up their own shields while attacking each other's, on top of physically moving and magically casting spells, tired them out

completely in less than two hours. Moody was rather disappointed but managed to squeeze another half-hour of duelling out of them after some rest. For the rest of the week, they had to constantly hit each other with Legilimency as well as keeping up their shields, once again nearly tiring them out by lunch. They also offered to help Neville and Luna with their Legilimency skills each evening, using an empty classroom to practice since Luna couldn't enter the Gryffindor common room.

The third Saturday, the last weekend before the Triwizard's Choosing of Champions, was the worst one yet. Moody certainly wasn't kidding when he said his training was going to be hard- this time they had to chase each other through the woods while, keeping aware of their constantly-changing environment while keeping track of their opponent and keeping their mental shields up. Once again, Moody surprised them all with the mobility he had, and they were all beginning to suspect that his false leg was probably less of a handicap and more of an enhancement for him, much like his eye. None of them lasted until lunch, after which Harry and Hermione were both leaning on each other for support. The two of them wandered up to the Room of Requirement to take an afternoon nap, feeling it would give them more comfortable beds and far greater privacy.

"You know, the other students are enjoying the day as a Hogsmeade weekend," said Hermione, as they lay on an extremely soft couch in each other's arms.

Harry got the clue instantly. "I'll make it up to you, my love. Can we just lay here and pretend it's a date?"

"No! You're going to have to take me on a proper date next Hogsmeade weekend."

Harry summoned up a little bit of strength and hit her with a burst of Legilimency to see if he could find out exactly what she wanted. She was aching all over, and she wanted to relax. "Oho, but what if I give you a massage right here?" asked Harry.

"That's cheating!" giggled Hermione. "But I'm not going to say no." She took off her robes and sweater, leaving a tank-top on. Harry gave a hopeful look, and Hermione smirked. "Oh no, you're not getting any more than this. Now get to work!" she laughed as she

flopped face down on the couch. Harry carefully placed his hands on her shoulders, noticing the runes he had etched into her back were now giving a barely visible glow and pulsing faintly. He began kneading her shoulders and her neck gently, afraid of hurting her.

"Harder, Harry, I can barely feel it." Harry began pushing down with more weight, pressing his thumbs into the base of her neck while rubbing her shoulders with his palms.

"I was worried I would hurt you... do you feel anything from these scars?" Harry asked. He suddenly felt her tense up, and he stopped his massage.

"Do... do they... oh, they must be disgusting to look at... I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said, nearly getting up. "We shouldn't have done this."

Pushing her back down as gently as he could, Harry said, "No, Hermione. I told you that you were beautiful when I was carving these runes, and you're still beautiful now. I'm just worried that... well, I might have done something wrong and they might not have healed properly. Does anything hurt?"

Harry could feel Hermione calm down as her breathing evened out. "Thank you, Harry. You did everything right. I can't even feel the runes, and I sometimes forget they're there." She relaxed more and closed her eyes. "Can you move lower? The middle of my back... yes, just below the shoulder blades... right there... mmm..." Harry continued the massage for half an hour, until he was certain Hermione was asleep. Feeling completely spent himself, he flopped down beside her, with his head resting on her back.

Once again, he found himself flying. He knew right from the beginning that he had to look for Hermione this time. He flew along the coast, searching for her. Where could she be this time? Seeing a fuzzy brown speck down on the ground, he dove towards it. He'd found her, but she wasn't alone. There was a scarred, blue eyeball rolling around. It was going to hurt her! He snatched up the eyeball, flying out to the sea and dropped it. Returning to Hermione, he landed beside her. She stared at him with big, dark brown eyes, regarding him curiously. The short brown feathers on her head were slightly ruffled, giving her a very soft, bushy appearance. She chirped to him to follow, where she led him to a hole in the ground.

Hopping in, she led him deeper and deeper until they found themselves in the Chamber of Secrets at school. Hermione glanced around, spotting something. She hooted to Harry, alerting him of the danger. Harry flew over and saw a snake swimming just below the surface of the water, so he dove down, snatched it out. Hermione flew up to join him as they carried the snake away.

Harry woke rather peacefully. "I wonder what that was," he mused. He discovered they had both shifted in their sleep, and Harry now had his arms wrapped protectively around Hermione.

"Yeah, me too. You were the osprey, weren't you, Harry?" Hermione had woken up at the same time.

"Yeah... wait, how did you know what I was? Were we dreaming the same dream?"

"I don't know... but it felt like a continuation of our animagus dream. What was I? I had no idea I was able to fly until the end."

"You were an owl, Hermione. A small brown one. I don't know what type, though..."

"A burrowing owl! This whole time I was looking up burrowing animals like rats and squirrels and rabbits because the last dream I had this instinct to run underground a lot. I'm an owl?" She laughed.

"Well, you were certainly a very cute owl," said Harry. He thought about it for a second, and laughed. "And it fits you so well! The feathers and everything! And the fact that you'd rather walk than fly... until I got there..."

"Well, I think the osprey fit you very well, too, Harry. You had jet-black feathers on your head instead of the usual white... and the green eyes told me it was you for sure. And you certainly love doing those daring dives when you play Quidditch."

"I'm glad we finally found our forms, Hermione. I honestly think... I wouldn't be an animagus without you."

"And I wouldn't want to be one without you. Thank you, Harry. I'm glad we'll be able to fly together... in human or animal form."

Monday classes were cancelled, so the students and staff could prepare for the Halloween Feast as well as the Choosing of the Champions. Early in the morning, dozens of extra aurors arrived to ensure extra security around Hogwarts, and especially around the Great Hall. Even an exorcist had arrived, threatening Peeves with a permanent banishment if he didn't behave for the day. Early in the afternoon, many officials began arriving, including Ludo Bagman and Bartemius Crouch. Several reporters had already begun to interview the potential champions, as well as some of the staff members for their favourite picks. Hermione, knowing that reporters rarely ever got a chance to come on campus, knew that a few of them were likely to use the opportunity to ambush Harry and get an article on him, decided to spend as much of the day as possible in the Gryffindor tower. Harry certainly didn't mind, and thanked her for the most excellent excuse to spend most of a day snogging on a couch.

They only came downstairs when it was time for the feast itself. They quickly moved to the tables so no reporters would have time to see or stop Harry for an interview. The school staff were no longer sitting at the staff table, as the table was now being used for high-ranking officials. There were many more officials than before- beside Mr. Crouch were his foreign counterparts; the French director of international relations, Jean-Pierre Armand; and the Bulgarian Administrator of Foreign Affairs, Boris Petrinovich. Sitting beside Headmaster Dumbledore were Madam Maxime and Headmaster Karkaroff, and to their left were the heads of states. The Minister for Magic of Britain Cornelius Fudge was flanked by the French President of Magic Jules Dupuis to his left and the Bulgarian High Governor Vladmir Georgiev to his right. Hermione was pointing out several others to Harry, but he was beginning to lose track. All he knew was that there were a lot of important people present, which explained all the aurors standing at the ready behind them. After about an hour of introductions, national anthems and other standard formalities, the actual choosing would begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, welcome to the first Triwizard Tournament in over two hundred years!" Dumbledore announced to the crowd. "Hogwarts is very honoured to be the school to host this historic event for its revival. The cup is nearly ready to choose its champions for each school. When the cup chooses a champion, please stand up and allow yourself to be escorted over to the room to my left."

The cup's flames turned from blue to yellow, and then it suddenly spat out a piece of parchment. Dumbledore caught it, and announced, "The champion from Hogwarts is... Cedric Diggory!" There was tremendous applause from all the students of Hogwarts, but especially from the Hufflepuffs. It surprised a few students, but Harry felt it was rather appropriate. Most students from other houses would be representing their own house as well as Hogwarts, but a Hufflepuff, known for their loyalty, would represent the entire school best. Cedric got up, waved to everybody, bowed to a few and made his way over to the champion's room.

The applause died down when the flames of the cup turned yellow once more. Another piece of parchment sprang into the air and into Dumbledore's hands. "The champion from Durmstrang is... Viktor Krum!" Large rounds of applause came not only from his own school, but his many Quidditch fans in the audience. He was a very predictable choice- Krum was not only famous for his professional quidditch skills, but he was known to be an aggressive dueller and spellcaster as well. He stood up with a proud expression, but didn't allow any excitement to show on his face. He made his way over to the champion's room as well.

Once again, the hall quieted down as the flames turned yellow. The third piece of parchment shot out. Dumbledore announced, "The champion from Beauxbatons is... Fleur Delacour!" The applause wasn't quite as strong, as Delcour didn't seem to be very well known outside of her school. The Beauxbatons students didn't spend much time associating with Hogwarts students over the past month, choosing to be far friendlier with the Bulgarians. It seemed that the French-English rivalries remained extremely strong in the magical world. The girl herself, although not well known, was well-noticed. She was easily the most beautiful girl in the room. When she stood up, nearly every single male present was unable to take his eyes off her. She carried herself haughtily, making a point of ignoring every person who was lusting after her as she walked to the champion's room.

"Congratulations to Cedric Diggory, Viktor Krum, and Fleur Delacour! These three champions will now be briefed..." The headmaster paused as the goblet's flame turned yellow again. It spat out one last piece of parchment. It dropped in front of Dumbledore, who was caught off guard and unsure of what to do

with it. Picking it up, he read out the name. "The... fourth champion of the Triwizard Tournament... is Harry Potter."

As the entire room turned to focus on him, he whispered to Hermione, "Why am I not surprised?"

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- Harry's starship is based on the Andromeda series of Starships. The Siege Perilous design philosophy is very simple: Missiles and Armor. Missiles, missiles, and more missiles, with minimal crew, and only one airlock to minimize entry points. And armor. Lots of armor. An ideal ship design for destroying invaders and protecting memories, I'd say. I wouldn't really consider myself a huge fan of the TV show, although the technology and ship design in the series really caught my attention. And I know the show only came out in 2001, but Gene Roddenberry thought it up in the 70's or something, so let's pretend there were a few books before then that Harry read.
=P

- Do you guys think I should include Neville and Luna into the time loops? I've still got time to incorporate them into the story. I'm not sure if they should also be given an equal share of "experience," either. There won't be any time travel during the actual Triwizard, though, I'll just say for now. I just want to flesh out a good Triwizard Tournament for the next several chapters.

Chapter 13: Fallout

The crowd murmured as all the officials at the head table looked at each other, unsure of what to do. The twins started laughing and gave him a hearty applause, but very few people followed suit. Most of the reporters were furiously scribbling notes down.

"You know what the odd thing about this is?" asked Hermione.

"What?"

"Why have we never tried getting you out of it?"

"What do you mean?" Harry didn't quite follow what Hermione was saying.

"I mean, I'm fairly certain the last three times you went through this, you participated each time," Hermione explained. "Why go through the trouble? Did we never figure out how to get you out of it, or was there actually some advantage to being in the Tournament?"

Harry never really gave it much thought, but she was right. Why didn't he send back information on how to stop himself from getting entered? Did he have to enter? Was it already too late to stop it? Or maybe it just wasn't important enough to worry about? "I'm not sure, Hermione. Let's just go with it this time and see what I can get out of it."

"Mr. Potter, would you please enter the champion's room," came the announcement from the officials' table.

"That's a good idea, Harry. I know the tournament had a reputation for being dangerous, but it's supposed to be a lot safer this year, right? Maybe we can use it to our advantage, somehow." Neither Hermione or Harry heard the order.

"I'm not sure about the tournament itself, but I think the champions are allowed to skive off classes whenever they want, and skip the end of year exams..." Harry grinned.

"Harry! That's abusing your position!" Hermione scolded.

"Mr. Potter, please enter the champion's room now," Dumbledore repeated.

"Hey, I wasn't planning on just taking naps, you know. I'd work on the combat skills that Moody was teaching us, and maybe practice some spells in the Room of Requirement that aren't... part of the school curriculum," Harry answered defensively.

"Oh, fine, as long as you're not wasting it. But you'd better come to Runes and Arithmancy with me, because you'd never catch up otherwise."

"Of course, my love. I'd never be able to get through those classes without you," he said, letting their foreheads touch. They both giggled.

"Mr. Potter, please come with me." One of the officials had walked up to Harry and tapped him on the shoulder. Harry, finally remembering what was going on, grinned sheepishly. He gave Hermione a quick chaste kiss as he got up and walked over to the champion's room, ignoring all the cheers and jeers he was getting from everyone.

As Harry entered the small room, the three other champions looked at him, unsure of what to make of his presence. Harry was quickly followed by the three Headmasters as well as Ludo Bagman and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"What iz zis leettle boy doing 'ere? Are we not finished wiz ze sélection?" asked the Beaxubatons champion.

"That is precisely the issue, Miss Delacour. The Goblet of Fire seems to have chosen a fourth champion," answered Bagman.

"What? Am I not the Hogwarts champion any more? How did Harry get picked?" asked Cedric angrily.

Harry raised his hands as if surrendering. "Hey, don't ask me. Weird stuff tends to happen to me, not because of me. That's the twins' territory."

Karkaroff snarled at Harry. "This pathetic boy tricks the Goblet and then tries to pass the blame off on someone else. He's nothing but a

cheat and a coward." His remark instantly set off several tempers, but Shacklebolt drew his wand and glared at everyone.

"Surely, this is a security matter. The Goblet of Fire was compromised, and I doubt that a fourth-year student would be able to unravel the charms on the Goblet to switch it to a four-school tournament," explained the Head Auror. "Is there any way to call this tournament off?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Bagman. "The champions are bound by magic to compete, or else they will forfeit their magic..."

"Zen ze tournament will not be fair. 'ogwarts cannot have two champions," interjected Madam Maxime.

Krum finally spoke up. "Vill not matter. Only one winner. Strongest vill win. He is veakest among us four." He gave a predatory smile to Harry, and spoke to him directly. "You may be strong in your year, but you are nothing against us. Maybe little girls are scared?" He eyed both Fleur and Cedric when he said that.

"I'd like to ask a question about my entry," stated Harry loudly. All eyes turned to him. "Headmaster, don't people also have to write their school along with their name when they place it in the Goblet of Fire?"

"Yes," answered Dumbledore. "I see what you're asking. And no, 'Hogwarts' was not written on the piece of parchment with your signature."

"Then that solves your concern, doesn't it, Madam Maxime? I'm not competing for Hogwarts. I'm independent," Harry concluded. Everyone in the room murmured to each other. There were a few arguments between the headmasters, but they seemed to settle their differences eventually. Cedric looked at Harry questioningly, while Fleur watched with distain, and Krum all but ignored him. Finally, the three headmasters turned to face the champions.

"We have reached an agreement that we feel is fair for all the champions," said Dumbledore, smiling. "We've agreed that Harry will compete as an independent contestant. However, since he is still attending Hogwarts classes, he will technically be receiving a Hogwarts education. Thus, we have agreed that, should any of the

Champions choose to, they may attend any Hogwarts class as well. On top of that, all champions are now given complete access to the Hogwarts library, including the restricted section. Lastly, any unused classroom within the castle may be used for your personal training and study, so long as you confirm with either myself or deputy headmistress McGonagall before you use it."

All three contestants nodded. Oh, Hermione is going to love this. Maybe I should've entered her into the Triwizard as an early Christmas present or something... thought Harry.

Ludo Bagman addressed the champions. "Well, I guess that all four of you will be champions, then. We'll have to inform the judges and change the scoring system a bit, but for the most part, none of the events will change. The locations, rules, format for each trial are already set. You are all expected to have only a limited amount of time to prepare for each trial. Don't attempt to cheat this information out, or else you will be disqualified from the event in question. If you try this multiple times, you'll automatically lose the tournament. Each of the events is spaced approximately one month apart. You'll find out about each one in due time."

"Lastly, all of you are to meet this Friday afternoon for the official wand weighing. The first trial will be the Trial of Air, taking place at Corrieshalloch Gorge in two weeks. You will only be given more details on the day of the trial- thinking on your feet is part of the tournament, after all. Now, all four of you, follow me."

They followed Bagman out the door and on to the stage at the front of the Great Hall. People began murmuring again once they saw Harry standing beside Cedric, Krum, and Fleur. Bagman began his speech, gesturing to the champions standing behind him. "Ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, as you can see, there has been a change of plans. There are now four champions in the Triwizard Tournament! I present to you Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts, Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons, Viktor Krum of Durmstrang, and Harry Potter, as an independent! This means there will be slight changes to a few of our events, but never fear, the tournament will go on! The first event will take place two weeks from now at Corrieshalloch Gorge. Reserve your tickets today by sending your owls to the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Prices start as low as eight sickles. We have limited space, so order quickly!"

The reporters all frantically began asking questions, but none of the champions wanted to be part of the ruthless media frenzy in front of them. They followed Krum, who had experience with this sort of thing, off the stage and quickly left the Great Hall, ignoring reporters the entire way. As soon as Harry managed to break free from the crowd, he scrambled up to Gryffindor Tower, finally getting some peace and quiet. Three whole minutes of it, to be precise.

The Fat Lady opened again to a stream of rambunctious Gryffindors. Most of them were applauding his entry into the tournament. One of them stormed up to his room without a backwards glance. Another placed her arms around Harry as if protecting him from the crowd. "Hermione... you're just who I wanted to see," Harry whispered into her ear.

"What was that?" Hermione nearly shouted at Harry. She couldn't hear a word he said over the commotion everyone else was making.

"Never mind... I was just trying to be sweet and tender but that's just about impossible right now," Harry said dejectedly. He settled for just holding her for a minute, letting the warmth of her body and the scent of her hair wash over him and help him ignore everyone else. His housemates were relentless, however, and eventually he couldn't help but hear what they were saying.

"How did you do it? What was the secret to getting past the age line?"

"Are you scared? Oh, of course not. You're Harry frickin' Potter!"

"He's way better than Cedric. I mean, sure, Ced's got good grades, good looks, the pick of any girl he wants, and he's three years ahead of Harry, but he's got no chance over the Boy-Who-Lived!"

"Harry, mate! When did you have a go at it? Wait... don't tell me..."

"...did you set us up? You let us take the fall that night and you got to spend all night figuring out the cup, didn't you?"

"Seriously, mate, that's some quality pranking right there."

"Agreed, my dear brother. We only thought of getting past the age line. Harry here somehow managed to fool the Goblet itself!"

The last few caught his attention, and he saw the twins looking at him. They were practically awestruck- he knew they were just begging to know how it had happened. "Sorry guys, it wasn't actually me that did it."

"Well, alright then, who put your name in for you?"

"And how did he actually get your name in the cup? We convinced George Bolstein to drop our names into the cup but the parchments just flew back out."

"That's not what I meant... I didn't ask for anyone to put my name in the cup. Someone wanted me in the tournament," Harry explained.

"Harry, you shouldn't explain it to anyone," warned Hermione. "Otherwise we'll end up having to tell the whole story of Sirius, Pettigrew, the Marauder's Map, and everything else... just ignore it, pretend it was a good prank or something."

Harry nodded to her, and decided to respond with the prankster's motto: "Trade secret." They spent a good portion of the evening together while everyone else was hounding them for answers.

"Master Auror Moody, I'd like some of your insight," Shacklebolt said to Moody. They were discussing the strange turn of events of the evening along with several other aurors and tournament security officials.

"I told you I shouldn't even be here," Moody growled. "I was head of security until I was compromised. You shouldn't be using any of my plans. And I'm retired, Kingsley."

"Can't take the fight out of an old bear like you, sir. If losing a leg didn't stop you, you think retirement would?" Kingsley laughed. "Besides, I've drawn up my own security protocols. I'm just here to ask for some advice."

"Then you'd like my ideas as to why Potter's in the tournament? And don't call me sir. I'm retired."

"Couldn't hurt." Shacklebolt grinned.

"Someone either really likes him or really hates him. I'm leaning towards the latter."

"I don't see being in the tournament unwillingly as a benefit, either. But why do something as crude as entering him in the tournament?" Shacklebolt wondered.

"The tournament's dangerous for a seventh-year student. It could be downright deadly for a fourth-year," suggested one of the other aurors.

"No, if someone wanted Potter dead, they probably could have killed him in his sleep. As far as we know, this person incapacitated Moody, snuck into Hogwarts, and could unravel the charms on an ancient artefact."

"Publicity, then? Maybe the Tournament wasn't famous enough without featuring the Boy-Who-Lived," joked another.

"Please, serious answers-" began Kingsley.

"No, he's got a point," said Moody. "Publicity. The press will have a field day. I'm sure by tomorrow there'll be a million others trying to beat down the gates of Hogwarts to get some exclusive interview. Kingsley, we need to be even more restrictive now. Press is only allowed in on the days of the events. Public will have no access unless they're family or legal guardian of a student here. It's going to be chaos if we don't do this."

Kingsley nodded. "I'll take that into account. I'm worried about the guests, to be honest. The ministers of three countries or their ambassadors will be visiting the tournament regularly. They'll need extra protection."

"Scan everyone for Imperius as well," Moody said.

"Wait! That would slow down admittance considerably! We're hoping to see at least ten thousand people per event. The inconvenience would..." protested one of the tournament officials.

Moody slammed his fist on the table. "And how inconvenient would it be for the Minister of Magic to die, can you tell me that? They were

good enough to put me under an imperius, it means they'll have no qualms, nor difficulty at performing the spell on the spectators."

"Have we got any suspects?"

"Other than the fact that it's probably the same person who put me under Imperius? None. The most dangerous criminal out there right now is Sirius Black, and he doesn't seem to be the patient type."

"Twelve years in Azkaban can change a person. We don't even know if he has a motive, or if he's just insane. Getting into Hogwarts seemed to be just fine for him, he managed to sneak past Dementors last year. But for imperiusing Moody and re-charming the Goblet, he had to have an accomplice, even if it was him."

"We can use that to narrow the search. The suspect is probably a Master Enchanter if he could alter the cup. It's not like you could fool such a thing with a Confounding charm," Moody told them. "But if they're into criminal activity, I doubt they would be registered as a professional enchanter. You might have to dig pretty deep for this one, Shacklebolt."

"Thanks for your advice, sir." Shacklebolt turned to his team. "Let's begin with the basics. Reporters off the grounds, immediately. No more admittance until the Wand Weighing. Verne, Rutgers, you two start looking at the lists of master enchanters, then the lists of anyone who's taken an apprenticeship in enchantment but hasn't taken the mastery examination. The rest of you, we'll be working on reworking the event security to account for an extra champion and probably more visitors, as well."

Thankfully, by the next morning all the reporters had been escorted off the grounds. Harry and Hermione walked down to breakfast, still concentrating on ignoring the praise from the Gryffindors and the glares from the Hufflepuffs. However, it was one angry glare from a fellow Gryffindor that caught Harry's attention.

"Uh, hey Ron. Is something bothering you?" Harry ventured cautiously.

"You just had to enter the tournament, didn't you?" spat Ron venomously. Unfortunately, his words weren't the only thing he spat at Harry as bits of hash browns and sausage came flying out as well.

"Ron, I already told everyone last night... I didn't enter it. Someone else put my name in," said Harry, trying to remain as calm as he could as he flicked bits of food off his robes.

"You won't even own up to it? You know how much I wanted in on those thousand Galleons," Ron had actually stopped eating with a full plate of bacon in front of him, which was a bad sign.

"What? Ron, it's not like you get that money just from entering..."

"Yeah, the money doesn't even matter to you, does it? You're already rich and famous, but you don't even think about handing some my way!"

"WHAT?" exclaimed Harry. The last comment left him completely flabbergasted.

"Yeah, you don't even want to be seen with me, do you? You'd rather turn down box seats to the World Cup than be seen hanging out with a Weasley, huh?"

"That's... that's ridiculous! I was with..."

"Yeah, Hermione, we all know that by now. I should have guessed when you'd rather sit there doing nothing than play some chess, but..."

"We were practicing Occlumency! We explained it to you, but you didn't want to try it!" shouted Harry.

"And after Moody decided to take you guys on you don't even bother to hang around any more. Shows how much you care if you'd make some excuse to talk to Loony than help me with my homework..." Ron was venting without regard for what Harry was trying to say to him. Harry, still trying to placate his friend, was interrupted by Hermione.

"Silencio!" The silencing spell instantly shut Ron up, and Hermione stared daggers into his eyes. "Now you listen here, you stupid little git, you were the one who decided not to practice Occlumency with us and you were the one who decided not to train with Moody. You abandoned us, and now you're complaining that I'm not writing your

essays for you like I used to? You have no idea what friendship is, do you, you jealous prat? Harry would have gladly spotted you some money if you asked nicely, he would have helped you try to get your name into the cup like he helped the twins if he knew how, and he'd still be your friend if you trusted him at all. But you didn't, and both Neville and Luna are being far better friends than you are." Without bothering to remove the silencing spell from Ron, she grabbed Harry by the arm, and said, "Come on, Harry. I don't think I can stop with one spell if he's in my face any longer."

The rest of the day wasn't much better- unfortunately for them, they had potions and transfiguration, and in both classes they were seated right beside Ron. Harry spent most of it trying to make amends with Ron, but Hermione pulled him back each time. At the end of the day, they asked for a completely private room from the Room of Requirement.

"We can't spend our lives fixing his mistakes for him, Harry," she said with a determined look. "Let him figure it out himself for once."

"Hermione... maybe he can have a second chance..." Harry hated seeing her so distressed and angry.

"I am giving him a second chance, Harry. If he comes and apologizes himself, then I'd be willing to forgive him. If he doesn't, though, I'm not holding his hand and guiding him. I'm not going to... I mean, I can't... um... I need to confess something," said Hermione, looking down at her shoes.

"You haven't done anything wrong, have you?"

"I just need you to listen to my perspective."

"On what? Ron? Um... alright." They both sat down, while Harry watched Hermione expectantly.

"You remember how we first became friends?" Hermione asked quietly.

"How could I forget? We fought off the troll when you were in the bathroom..." Harry grinned.

"But you remember why I was there in the first place?"

"Err... you were crying... because Ron insulted you..."

"I've always had my doubts about him, Harry. He's a lot nicer when you're around, but do you have any idea what he says behind your back?"

"Behind my back? He would never..."

"He used to brag about being friends with you, the one and only Harry Potter. He's held on to you because he wants to be rich and famous, too. I guess after three years of our 'adventures' he's starting to realize that being your friend isn't a free ticket to fame and fortune."

"He does that? I just don't see him using me like..." Harry had never seen this side of Ron... well, not until recently at least.

"He's used me, Harry. You have no idea what it's like. Do you know what it's like to have him practically demand that I help him with his homework, no matter how busy I am? He acted like it was his right to have me fix up his horrid essays, and then he has the audacity to complain when I tell him to get his work done before the last minute."

Harry stayed silent. He knew that Ron went to Hermione for homework help far more often than he did, and Ron was certainly a procrastinator. He had never known how hard it was on Hermione. He was confused by what Hermione was explaining to him. He didn't want to lose Ron because the little redhead on the train was the first friend he'd made, but he was starting to realize that perhaps he was just clinging on to Ron out of some kind of sentimental value.

"Why would he blow up now?" Harry asked, shaking his head. "He's certainly gained a lot of fame from what we've done together..."

"Harry, he's never really been known outside these walls as anything more than Harry Potter's friend. Nobody knew about the philosopher's stone in first year except us and a few staff members sworn to secrecy. In second year everyone knew you had saved Ginny's life, not Ron. And in third year, he got a little glory when everyone thought Sirius attacked him, but that's it. And at the end of the year you how he was telling the story to everyone who was in

earshot, but that just made him better-known among the students at best."

"But how's this any different? We both know that odd things just keep happening to me all the time."

"Because this time you'll be famous outside of Hogwarts! You'll be making the papers! And not just the Daily Prophet, either, Harry. There's reporters from around Europe to cover this event. You were famous as the Boy-Who-Lived in Britain, but for the rest of the world you were little more than a storybook character. Now you'll be an actual international celebrity. Ron hasn't got a chance of sharing that glory with you."

Harry sighed. "I've told him that I never wanted this fame..."

"But he does," Hermione said. "I guess he figures that you should just hand it over to him, somehow, but you haven't. But you don't remember the details of the past three loops we did with the original beacon, do you?"

"What? No, those memories are practically gone. I can't remember anything except what we specifically sent back to ourselves with occlumency. Do you remember something about Ron?"

"No, it's just a feeling... but I'm pretty sure that he did this every time. And I don't think he ever tried apologizing, either. This is probably his fourth chance and we just don't remember it."

For the remainder of the week, Ron remained distant, spending his time with other people. He especially seemed to be trying to make friends with the Hufflepuffs, who were rightfully angry that Harry was stealing some of Cedric's thunder. Hermione made sure that Harry didn't cave and try to make up with Ron, as she made it abundantly clear that Ron was the one who was wrong, so he would have to be the one to make it up to them. Unfortunately, he didn't make any indication all week that he was even thinking about it.

On the Friday of the wand weighing, Harry was with Hermione in their Runes class when a tournament official knocked on the door. Although she didn't make a habit of reading tabloids, she did know exactly what kinds of 'reporters' worked for them and found a few sample articles for Harry. Thankfully, Harry was already somewhat

familiar with the concept of paparazzi, having cleaned and sorted his aunt Petunia's stacks of The Daily Mail every week in his childhood. He never really understood the reason why people wanted to know exactly what some famous person was wearing while suntanning on a beach halfway around the world. Hermione had to remind him that this time, he was that famous person.

Right before he left, Hermione kept giving him last-minute tips. "Don't bother answering any question you're not comfortable with. In fact, just say 'no comment' to all their questions if you feel like it. Just stand and smile, don't try anything dramatic. Most of all, stay calm and keep your temper in check! Every one of them is probably trying to get a rise out of you so they'll have something scandalous to write about."

Hermione's advice turned out to be invaluable, as when Harry entered the Great Hall he was assaulted by a swarm of camera flashes and a barrage of voices, every one of them trying to shout over the others. Harry ignored them all, and his escort helped plough the way through to where the other champions were already waiting. Fleur and Cedric were chatting, while Krum sat stoically, much like the way he appeared in many of his Quidditch posters. Ludo Bagman had once again taken center stage, and off to the side were several mediwitches, as well as Ollivander.

"Everyone, please settle down. The Weighing of the Wands is about to begin. Please keep quiet until after the champions have been inspected and save your questions for afterwards." After reporters finally settled down, Bagman introduced Mr. Ollivander. "Britain's most famous wand-maker and wand expert, Mr. Ollivander, will be conducting the Weighing of the Wands today. Ladies first, of course. Miss Delacour, would you please step forward?"

Fleur walked up to the old, eccentric wandmaker and curtsied to him. She handed him her wand, and he twirled it around in his fingers, then regarded it carefully. "Nine and a half inches, rosewood. Inflexible. Let's see here... Veela hair?" His eyes widened and he looked to Fleur.

"Yes, ze core of zis wand comes from ze 'ead of my own grandmuzzer," Fleur stated proudly. "Eet was custom-made for me."

"Hm..." Ollivander gripped the wand and conjured a small stone block. He then levitated the block up and down, although it didn't seem to go the same height or speed each time. He transfigured it into a block of wood, then set it on fire. The flames very nearly caught the old wandmaker off guard, as they erupted from the tip of the wand and completely engulfed the wood right away. He extinguished the flames by conjuring water, cast a reductor to blow it to splinters, then vanished everything. "Rather temperamental, Veela hair. I never use it myself." Seeing Fleur's disapproval of his assessment, he handed the wand back to her. "I'm certain it is highly attuned for you, especially if your grandmother gave that hair with you in mind. Could you perform the same set of spells, please?"

Fleur took her wand back, and expertly conjured the stone, levitating it with complete control. The transfiguration was much faster, and the flames far more controlled. She completed the round of spells twice as quickly as Ollivander did.

"Yes, that wand is certainly in perfect working order and is definitely very well matched for you, Miss Delacour. I declare this wand fit for competition." Fleur stepped back in line as Ollivander moved in front of Cedric. Two mediwitches walked up to Fleur and escorted her to the same side room they went to during the selection ceremony. Harry started to feel nervous, as the set of spells definitely involved two conjurations (albeit simple ones), transfiguration, and several charms. If he had to demonstrate it himself, he thought he might end up embarrassing himself. The other students were definitely confident in their abilities, having learned those spells in school already.

"Ah, one of my own. Twelve and a quarter inches, Ash. A pleasant springiness to it, if I may say so myself. Unicorn hair. Got it off one of the feistiest unicorns I've ever encountered. I see you've taken care of it."

Cedric grinned. "Polished it last night, sir." Harry quickly glanced down at his own wand. From sticking it into a troll's nose to dropping it in a pool of basilisk saliva, his wand looked far older than the three years he'd owned it. In fact, it seemed especially battle-worn given his last several weekends running around the Forbidden Forest being chased by, or chasing, Moody.

Ollivander performed the same set of spells as he did with Fleur, and then handed the wand to Cedric, who once again performed them slightly better than the wand-maker. "I know my wands, Mr. Diggory. They certainly like me, but this one definitely likes you. I declare this wand fit for competition."

Cedric was led away from the group by the two medi-witches to the same room, who had returned with Fleur during Cedric's inspection. Ollivander moved on to Viktor.

"Ah yes, a Gregorovitch. His style is certainly not to my taste, but I can't doubt his skill. Ten and a quarter inches, Hornbeam. Dragon heartstring core. Absolutely rigid, and slightly thicker than most wands I've seen. Very aggressive indeed." Ollivander then performed the same set of test spells. The flame seemed especially powerful, although not as strong as with Fleur's wand, and the reductor curse blasted the wooden block to sawdust instead of splinters. He handed the wand back to Viktor, who performed the same spells and certainly didn't bother turning down the power.

"A most powerful wand, very suited to charms and curses. You've got quite a bit of power there, Mr. Krum. I declare this wand fit for competition." Krum took his wand back and was led to the side room as Cedric emerged.

Harry finally noticed how all the journalists and photographers had their eyes on him when Ollivander stepped in front of him, asking for his wand. He handed his over.

"Yes, yes, yes... I remember this one. Spent nearly seven decades in my shop before it finally found its master. Eleven inches, Holly. Nice and supple. Phoenix feather core," he said. Once again, he performed the set of spells as easily as he did with Cedric's wand before handing it back to Harry. Harry hesitated for a moment. He realized he was being very nervous, and he would have to perform several spells above his year level in front of a large crowd. Sure, he'd performed the Patronus charm last year, which was pretty special, but he got a lot of training for that. This time it was sixth- and seventh-year spells he'd need to perform flawlessly or else the press would have a field day. He was nearly hyperventilating when he remembered Hermione's advice.

Stay calm, he thought to himself. Good advice, Hermione. When he thought of her, he suddenly remembered when they activated the very first beacon. He had performed complex conjuration without even thinking. He had learned all this before. In fact, he'd probably done this particular set of spells, in front of this crowd, several times before. Hopefully he could rely on his instincts for this. Taking a deep breath, he tried not to think too hard and conjured a brick, levitated it several times, turned it to wood, set it on fire, doused it with water, blew it up, then vanished the mess. His arm was practically moving by itself the whole time, without pausing. It seemed that he had performed all the spells expertly, and faster than everyone else as well.

Ollivander was smiling gleefully while Fleur and Cedric looked at him in surprise. "That wand is serving you very well, Mr. Potter, although I would ask that you take better care of it. I declare this wand fit for competition." Harry was led by the two mediwitches to the side room as Viktor rejoined the other school champions.

"Please lie down on the cot, Mr. Potter. We're just here to perform a quick medical and magical checkup." He lay down on his back, realizing what this could mean. They had better not ask me to take my shirt off or look at my back... he worried.

Seeing his distress, one of the witches smiled sweetly and said, "Don't worry, Mr. Potter, everything we find here will be held in the strictest privacy. We just need to know you're in good health before you compete."

They cast several diagnostic charms over his body. They paused at his legs. "Hm... I'm several old breaks, never quite healed properly... here, take this potion." They handed Harry a potion he'd never seen before. He drank it, and suddenly he was glowing all over his body. Both mediwitches stopped and stared, dropping their parchment and quills.

"Is this right? This can't possibly be..." one of them whispered.

"I... I can't believe it. You did give him the correct dosage, right?"

"Of course I did! Male, 159 centimeters, 51 kilograms." She glared at her co-worker.

Harry was somewhat confused. "What's going on?"

"Harry, this potion reveals old wounds that may not have healed properly. It seems to be showing that... well, nearly every bone in your body has had at least some hairline fracture or something that went untreated."

Harry was extremely reluctant to admit it, but with the glow coming off his body, he had to admit it. "I was treated pretty badly at home when I was little... please don't tell anyone."

"Mr. Potter... it seems you have recovered from these, but I do recommend undergoing a regimen of regrowth potions at a better time, which should reverse the trauma and bring you to your natural height and weight. Your growth has definitely been stunted. Unfortunately, with the tournament in the way, I don't think you'll have time for it..."

They also found that his glasses were horribly matched for his eyes, and stunned to realize that they didn't even offer any special enchantments. Harry was perplexed, but when he asked, they told him that wizards cure eyesight problems easily with a potion. Nearly every wizard who wears glasses does so because they were enchanted to give them better vision some how, be it night-vision, telescopic vision, or something else. Unfortunately, they weren't expecting any champion to have such a severe problem, and they didn't have the potion with them. Thankfully, the examination ended without having to take his shirt off, and neither witch saw the runes on his back. They reluctantly checked off his medical form, saying that although he'd suffered a lot of abuses in the past, he wasn't unhealthy at the given moment and would be given clearance to compete in the Tournament. Harry made a mental note to ask Hermione about the eyesight potion and regimen of regrowth potions.

Harry stepped back out, and it was evident his exam had taken quite a bit longer than the other three. Standing beside the other champions, he decided to follow Krum's example and gave little more than a proud, but tight-lipped smile for the cameras. Fleur was obviously playing up her beauty and posing for the cameras, and Cedric was taking her lead and giving friendly smiles. He ignored the journalists, declining to answer their questions, especially any that even remotely pertained to his entry in the Goblet. Classes were

long over by the time the whole ceremony was over, and everyone was ushered out in time for the hall to be cleaned up and dinner served. All four champions were escorted to the small side room again, this time with Bagman.

"I'll be letting you all know the rules of the tournament now. Throughout the entire tournament, there will be no Unforgivables curses. That one should be obvious. Any curse that is meant to cause harm by interfering with medical treatments is forbidden. If a spell is cast with intent to maim, permanently injure, or kill, you will instantly forfeit your place in the tournament. Is that clear?" They all nodded, although Krum was glowering as he did. "If you have any questions whether or not a spell is permissible, please talk to me before the event." He said that to everyone, but he was looking straight at Krum when he did.

"In the seven trials, you'll be scored based on your performance, skill, and character. The majority of the score will always be based on what place you finish, so I suggest practicality over showiness. Your total score for the seven trials will determine how much of an advantage you get for the final task. Now, I'll explain the first trial, the Trial of Air. You'll have two weeks to prepare, and the event will take place on Saturday, the 19th. As you know, the event takes place in Corrieshalloch Gorge. You'll be flooing to Ullapool at nine in the morning with your professors and then flying to the competition site. The event itself will begin at noon. If you're late, you forfeit the match. Got that?" All four champions nodded.

"Next, I'll explain the rules for this specific trial. First, you must bring your own broom. No other flying device is allowed. You may carry your wands with you, but you may not cast a spell at your opponents or at their brooms. Attempting to knock your opponents off their brooms is forbidden. Touching the ground at the bottom of the gorge will result in a disqualification. Flying into the muggle-visible portion or flying above the top of the gorge will also result in disqualification. That's all. You'll be briefed on the actual trial on the day you arrive."

All four of them left, returning to their separate dorms to figure out exactly what was in store for them and the best way to prepare. Harry knew he'd need Hermione's help with this one... and probably the entire year, for that matter.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- Well, here's the tipping point for Ron. Did it seem too abrupt or OOC? It felt a little forced as I was writing it.

- so there you have it, a completely different first task to start with. I do still feel like throwing a dragon in there as one of the tasks (and most of you can probably guess it'll be the Trial of Fire), but it seems a little dramatic to start with something that hard.

- No, Harry will not receive a miraculous boost in powers if he does take the regrowth potions. And he won't be taking them... this cycle, at least.

- chapter revised slightly, just added a short scene.

Chapter 14: Aerial Preparations

"You know, I have to wonder why I'm stuck in this tournament in the first place." Harry had brought Hermione to the library following Moody's training session on Saturday. Technically, Hermione had dragged Harry there at a full sprint when Harry told her he had unrestricted access to the Restricted section, despite being 'dead tired' at the end of practice. Harry also, technically, didn't count this as a date, but Hermione was certainly having a good time. He was flipping through *Broken Broomsticks: Good Reasons to Stay Grounded*, which listed many common aerial mishaps with brooms, which Harry had never seen, since he rarely flew outside the Quidditch pitch. Hermione was flipping through *Brewes For Thine Bod*, one of the restricted books on potions that permanently modify a person's body. She was specifically looking up the eyesight potion and the regrowth potion that Harry told her about.

"What do you mean? The Goblet's a binding magical contract. Whoever messed with it to get your name in didn't muddle that part up, at least," she answered without looking up from the book. "Oh, neat! This one should permanently boost your power... oh, wait, never mind. Eew."

"No, not that, I mean why would anyone even bother sticking my name in? And what do you mean, eew?" Harry really needed to learn how Hermione could hold two conversations at the same time so easily.

"Oh, it's just that you needed to drink someone's blood and throw in some dead guy's skull. I don't think you'd want that one. Anyways, Moody guessed the whole thing was an assassination attempt, right?"

"Oh, that IS gross! I can see why that book's restricted. And I'd agree with Moody, but I don't see what me being in a tournament is going to do to help an assassin. I'm not going to kill anyone."

"But don't you see what it's done to the security of the event? As soon as your name was announced, the number of journalists and photographers trying to get into the event practically tripled! The tickets to the Trial of Air were sold out overnight, and people are demanding more seating already... and Bagman wants to let them in,

because it'll make them more money! It's become a nightmare for Auror Shackbolt."

"So you're saying that I'm just a distraction so they'll have an easier time sneaking in as part of the crowd?"

"Yeah, that's my best guess. It's the only thing I can think of that makes sense, though. Oh, I found the vision-correction potion. It takes about a week to brew, though. The customized recipe that uses some of your tears and eyelashes will guarantee perfect vision, compared to the more generic version."

"Do you need me to owl-order any ingredients? I'd rather not have to tell Snape that I need to borrow any rare ingredients." Harry closed his book, and grabbed the next one on the pile. Aerial Attackers: Creatures from the Clouds, a book of the deadliest flying beasts. He was almost certain some of the "obstacles" in the course would be living ones.

"There are a few expensive ones for the custom version... Are you sure you can afford-" Hermione cut herself off when she saw Harry's disapproving look. "Oh... right... silly me. I doubt it would cost more than thirty galleons... but do you trust me to brew this potion for you, Harry?"

"Hermione, I'd trust you with my life. In fact, I think I've already done that more than once." Harry leaned over and whispered, "You've never failed me, my love. Don't you dare to ever doubt yourself."

Glancing around to make sure Madam Pince wasn't anywhere in sight, she said, "Harry, you're as sweet as ever." She gave him a long, sensual kiss for that.

"The library is not the place for you young couples to fool around, champion or no champion!" They flew apart as the librarian caught them. Satisfied that she had successfully killed the emotion in their impromptu make-out session, Madame Pince left. How does that woman do that? thought Hermione angrily. She interrupted a perfectly good time I was having with Harry. I can't believe she'd... oh wow, I can't believe that I actually dislike a librarian.

"Well, I guess it's time we get out of here," said Harry. "We can read these books more comfortably in the common room anyways."

The Sunday edition of Daily Prophet flew in at breakfast, bearing all the photos and articles from the Wand Weighing. Unsurprisingly, Fleur's provocative posing and extremely photogenic figure meant she was splashed all across page three. The wand weighing was summarized on the front page, and each Champion got a short article with a quick biography. Harry's article, however, caught Hermione's eye.

Harry Potter: Star Attention Seeker?

By Rita Skeeter

With the Weighing of the Wands ceremony on Friday, the champions were officially sworn into the Triwizard Tournament. Still, many of us are left wondering why there are four contestants instead of three. Harry Potter was chosen as an additional champion after champions for the three schools had already been selected.

"Yeah, I saw him when his name came out of the Goblet. He didn't even look surprised. He knew it was going to happen," said Ernie Macmillan, one of Mr. Potter's classmates in Hufflepuff.

It was well known among school gossip that Harry Potter, along with two others, made an attempted to place their names in the cup. Our not-so-noble Harry, it seems, abandoned his fellow rascals when the going got tough. The two of them were caught at the cup while Harry slipped away. Surprisingly, very little investigation has been performed or punishment exacted on the young Gryffindor. Harry Potter, it seems, has a penchant for breaking school rules.

"That boy is as arrogant as his father. He has no respect for the rules or the staff members. He gets away with whatever he wants thanks to his fame. He regularly gets into fights with students in my house and it is always up to me to see that he receives punishment, as others are often unwilling to be strict with our local celebrity," the Potions professor, Severus Snape, explained.

But getting himself into the tournament isn't even half the story, folks. You would think that some people would be glad to see two Hogwarts champions, unfair as though it may seem. However, Harry Potter decided to declare himself an independent- which means that,

should he win, his own school would not get the recognition for his achievement. He would keep everything to himself.

"Yeah, he's already famous, but that's not enough. I mean, he got a lot of attention at school for being the best seeker ever, and the youngest one too, but Quidditch was cancelled this year, you know? I guess he figured if he wasn't able to show off this year so he entered himself in the tourney," explained Harry's close confidant, Ronald Weasley...

A civil war practically erupted at the Gryffindor table when they saw the article. Some wanted to berate Harry for "betraying" Hogwarts. Some wanted to smack Ron for betraying a fellow housemate. Hermione was undoubtedly in the latter group as Harry restrained her. Harry definitely couldn't forgive Ron now, but seeing the twins' extremely disapproving looks they were giving their brother, he knew Ron would get what was coming to him. He quickly pulled Hermione from the table, muttering, "Come on, Hermione, I don't think we'll be able to have a decent breakfast for a while. Let's go for a fly."

Being back in the air was the only thing that could get Harry and Hermione away from the ruckus. Nearly everyone who read the article was now against Harry, save a few close friends who actually knew him. As they both needed to relieve themselves of their anger, they flew on separate brooms. Harry let his temper go by performing many hard dives and flying around at full speed, while Hermione preferred to fly lazily, watching Harry, to calm herself. Eventually, they both settled down enough to fly side-by-side and talk to each other.

"It's amazing how much that woman can write about you without ever having met you," Hermione observed.

"She also seems to have a knack for finding all the wrong people. Although I bet she knew exactly who to ask to get the worst opinions of me."

"Given how she managed to find Snape and Ron, I'm surprised she didn't quote Malfoy in that article today."

"Ugh, don't make it worse. Ron himself is bad enough. At least now we know why we didn't bring him back with us."

They flew silently for a while, simply following the winds and drafts as they flew around the castle's towers. Ever since they discovered their animagus forms, they were already beginning to feel the benefits before they mastered the transformation itself. Spending more time in the air was almost a natural feeling for both of them now. Although Harry had always enjoyed it, now he felt much more control and dominance when he was in the air now. Hermione, however, didn't have the same bird-of-prey instincts that Harry did, but she had gotten much more comfortable with flying very quickly. She still didn't enjoy flying alone, though Hedwig was becoming a regular flying partner for both of them. While watching her fly, they both began to notice many of the fine details of her flight, like the little adjustments she'd make to her wingtips or how she recovered from sudden gusts of wind.

After rounding the southern tower of Hogwarts for the seventh or eighth time, Hermione noticed they were being followed. Ducking behind the tower, they quickly flipped around and rose high into the air. Around the bend came... the Weasley twins, looking around to see where they had gone. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and Harry winked at her with a mischievous smile. He pulled off one of his signature dives, right in between the twins, nearly throwing them off their brooms in surprise. Hermione giggled at the sight.

"Blimey, Harry. We try to sneak up on you..."

"And you nearly take our heads off instead!"

"Perhaps we shouldn't have come to offer our services."

"He does seem rather ungrateful. Perhaps we shouldn't warn him what awaits inside, either."

"What? What's going on inside?" Harry asked as he flew upwards, level with the twins.

"Does it have something to do with Ron?" asked Hermione with a load of contempt.

"Interestingly enough..."

"It doesn't. Ron's tantrum with you is only outmatched by his hatred of the prince ponce of Slytherin."

"What? What's Draco planning?" Harry knew that Draco was rarely ever a real threat himself, but he did have a tendency to walk around with a little posse.

"Oh, nothing that bad, just a few badges that declare Cedric to be the real champion of Hogwarts." Fred answered nonchalantly.

"What? He is the Hogwarts champion. I'm an independent," Harry said, somewhat confused.

"Yeah, but the little ponce probably thinks it'll provoke you. We wanted to see what you'd do in response," said George.

"Oh, I think I'll come up with something," said Hermione.

"You'll have plenty of time for that while we deal with Harry here..." said both of the twins simultaneously as they grinned and looked at Harry.

"Uh... what's this for? I haven't done anything to you two..." Harry said nervously, ready to bolt at any second.

"While technically true, there is the fact that about a month ago you helped us with the Goblet..."

"And we haven't repaid you for it."

"Oh, thanks guys... you don't have to..." said Harry.

"And technically, there is also the fact that about a month ago, you left us at the Goblet without sufficient warning..."

"And we haven't repaid you for it."

"Uh... you... don't have to?" Harry knew the twins had something up their sleeves.

"So, we realized we had a way to both thank you and punish you at the same time."

"We're offering our services as the Gryffindor Quidditch Beaters to help train you for the Triwizard."

"Surely, you need to learn how to dodge better on the broom, since the task won't be about seeking a snitch."

"So, we'll be smacking a pair of bludgers at you for the next hour or so while you practice dodging." Both of them suddenly brandished their beater bats. Harry wasn't sure from where they'd pulled them out.

"Um... guys... I really think... uh..." Harry whipped around and bolted away. With two quick Accio's from the twins, a pair of training bludgers came flying from the ground and quickly intercepted Harry. Hermione was about to object but realized that Harry was soon having fun as the twins kept knocking both the bludgers towards him while he pushed his Firebolt to its limits while dodged, dipped, dove, ducked, and dodged some more. Half an hour later, all three of their movements were getting more sluggish as they tired themselves out. Fred and George halted the bludgers and dropped back down to the ground.

"Thanks, guys. That was fun. Maybe we should do it some more... it's actually pretty good training," said Harry.

"Next time we'll bring Lee with us, because it seems like you can handle two pretty easily." The twins waved goodbye to Harry as they carried the bludgers back to the Quidditch shed. Hermione joined him as they walked back towards the castle.

They found a group of Slytherins waiting for them at the entrance, with Malfoy leading the pack. Each one of them was wearing a badge with glowing letters.

Support Cedric Diggory, The Real Hogwarts Champion

Malfoy smirked, walking up to Harry. "How do you like them, Potter? And look at this!" He tapped the badge, changing the message.

POTTER'S A GLORY HOUND

The group of Slytherins laughed. At the back, they were handing the badges out to everyone passing by. "Would you like one, Potter?" Malfoy sneered, as he dangled another badge in Harry's face.

Hermione silently thanked the twins for the warning, as this was almost exactly what she expected. Typical Malfoy behaviour. Barely suppressing her smile, she nudged Harry. Right on cue, Harry grabbed the badge out of Malfoy's hand, saying, "Thanks, Malfoy. I never thought I'd see the day when Slytherins would willingly take a back seat to a Hufflepuff."

He passed the badge on to Hermione, who began inspecting the spellwork on it immediately. Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins suddenly quieted down, shocked by Harry's admission. "Shut up, Potter. Give that back." He made a grab at the badge that Hermione was holding.

Harry quickly stepped in between them, bringing himself face to face with his schoolyard rival. "You just offered it to me, Malfoy, and I took you up on your offer. You suddenly want it back? It's good to know that the Malfoy name is as worthless as ever, but I think I like these. I'll have another one, in fact." He quickly summoned another badge out of the hands of one of the Slytherins who were passing them out.

"Don't you talk about my family, Potter! Your line is sullied with muggles and half-bloods, while mine's completely pure! Your name is worthless compared to mine!" He made a grab at the badge that Harry was holding, but Harry quickly sidestepped. Dodging Draco was nothing compared to dodging bludgers... or Moody.

"Good enough for the Goblet of Fire, at least. Weren't you the one who was telling everyone you'd be putting your name in?" Harry was probably having a bit more fun taunting Draco than he should have, but it was mostly to buy some time for Hermione.

"Got it!" interrupted Hermione. "Only eleven words, Malfoy? Don't you know how to count any higher? You could have placed more words into the enchantment, you know. And the binding's pretty weak, I can rewrite this pretty easily."

"Shut up, Granger. What does a mudblood like you know?" Harry was tempted to blast him into the nearest broom closet again, but he wanted to see Hermione put Draco in his place, and Draco needed to be conscious for that.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "A lot more than you, obviously. Proponoto Proprio." The spell immediately changed the message on the badge Malfoy was wearing.

Support Cedric Diggory, The Hogwarts Champion!

It then flashed to the other message,

I went to the Triwizard Tournament and all I got was this stupid badge.

Harry laughed at the muggle joke. Hermione cast the spell on their badges, which Harry pinned to his robes immediately. Hermione did the same, and immediately began casting the spell on all the other Slytherins' badges, finishing with the box of badges behind them. All of them looked down, and immediately began fiddling with their badges. Malfoy kept trying spell after spell without effect. "Change it back, Granger!"

"Oh, a silly little mudblood like me wouldn't know anything about how to modify these badges, Malfoy. Maybe you should try some of that all-powerful pureblood magic of yours?" She laughed as she and Harry left the Slytherins, who were still trying to undo the spell that Hermione had cast. As they walked through the castle to the library, they cast the spell again on anyone they saw wearing the badge. They settled themselves down in the restricted section again and continued searching for useful information for the upcoming trial.

Harry owl-ordered the ingredients for the eyesight restoration potion first thing Monday morning. They had about a week and a half to go before the trial, and the potion would take a week to brew. As they walked down to breakfast, they continued to modify every one of Malfoy's badges they came across. Malfoy's face was livid. Apparently, they hadn't even made the badges themselves- Malfoy had spent a good chunk of his allowance money to buy them, custom-ordered from a party shop. Of course, each badge wasn't very valuable, but he had ordered nearly a thousand in the hopes of getting nearly everyone in the school to wear them. Luckily, Hermione had hit the bulk of them the day before while they were still sitting in boxes before they were handed out to people, and now Malfoy was left with a large batch of badges that he didn't know how to change.

"I'm touched Malfoy deemed me so special he spent his own allowance just to try to annoy me," Harry smirked.

"It does seem like he considers taking you down a notch to be his life's ambition, doesn't it? He seems rather... unhealthily obsessed with you." Hermione had an inquisitive look on her face.

"Yeah, and all this because I didn't want to be his friend..." Harry chuckled.

"What? He wanted to be your friend? You never told me that!"

Harry laughed. "Oh, it was on the train in first year. I'd just met Ron, and Malfoy walks in saying he wants to be my friend and I shouldn't associate with Ron. I turned him down. I don't remember ever doing anything else to him, but from then on he practically declared a blood feud against me."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" laughed Hermione. "We are so going to use that against him sometime! Poor little Draco, he couldn't command someone to be his friend, so they must be his enemy. I can't imagine living with such a simple mind like that." Harry made no comment on Hermione's last statement.

They finished their breakfast, gleefully explaining why they were both wearing Malfoy's badges. The twins loved it and were determined to get a pair of their own by the end of the day. Most of the Hufflepuffs were already wearing it, but most weren't audacious enough to leave it on the POTTER'S A GLORY HOUND message, and few noticed the one-word difference on the first message. By the end of the day, it seemed that Hermione had achieved what Draco had initially intended- nearly everyone in school wanted to wear a badge. Many people, even those who didn't like the fact that Harry wasn't competing for Hogwarts, didn't want to wear the original version because it would make them look like insulting jerks. The new one was humorous and actually served well as a Triwizard souvenir.

The next two weeks consisted of training with the twins along with Lee a few times. With the extra practice, Harry got good enough that he began to practice dodging while holding the broom with only one hand, practicing simple stunners, reductors, banishing and summoning charms, and shields with his wand in his other hand. At

this point, Hermione joined in, sending minor jinxes for Harry to block. At this point, Harry began having some trouble, but he realized he could use some light legilimency to help predict where everyone was aiming. When he did that, it once again got much easier. He knew not to rely on it too much, however, because in the actual trial he would be dodging mostly obstacles and creatures, instead of the other champions. They got to the point where he even tried dodging the Whomping Willow- but after barely dodging one branch, and getting his shirt torn off in the process, Hermione didn't let him go near the tree again.

On the days where he wasn't getting bludger-dodging practice with the twins or the tree, Harry and Hermione began attempting their animagus transformations. Sharing what they saw of each other's forms with legilimency, they knew exactly what to turn into, which made the visualization far easier. They began with small, superficial changes, like hair to feathers and toenails to talons. They had mastered the simple changes and were ready to begin morphing their arms and legs by the end of the second week. Unfortunately, it was clear they wouldn't be anywhere close to mastering the full transformation in time for the Trial, but they were determined not to rush their work, as an incomplete or incorrect transformation was quite dangerous.

At night, just before curfew, they would sneak back down to the Chamber of Secrets to check on the eyesight potion. At first, they thought of using the Room of Requirement, but they realized that if they left the potion in there for a week, other people would come across the room eventually. It was a relatively simple one to make, but it just required a lot of simmering time as well as a few expensive ingredients. Dobby supplied a few raw onions to get some tears out of Harry, tailoring the potion specifically to his eyes. Three days before the Trial of Air, Harry was laying on his back in the Chamber of Secrets.

"Are you ready, Harry?" Hermione was obviously more nervous than he was.

"Don't make me tell you again," growled Harry playfully. "Just do it."

The potion had been simmered down to only a few concentrated drops. Hermione carefully pulled one drop up with an eyedropper, and dripped it into one of Harry's eyes. Hermione figured that, even

if Harry trusted her with his life (and eyesight), they'd still do only one eye at a time so he wouldn't be completely blind if the potion came out incorrectly.

"How did that feel?"

"Not too bad, actually," answered Harry, blinking rapidly. "I can really feel it spreading around my eyeball, but it's not even uncomfortable."

"Huh... that's odd..." said Hermione, looking worried. "The book said there should be some mild pain involved. Harry, what if this means I screwed something up?"

"Hermione, you probably improved the formula by accident or something so that it doesn't hurtRRRRRTTT! Oh god, there it is! Mild pain my arse! OWWW! It feels like there's shards of glass in my eye! AHHH!" Harry looked like he wanted to claw at his eye, but he knew not to touch it. Hermione helped restrain him. "It hurts to look at things! It's too bright!"

"Um... it should only last a little while, Harry. Some light sensitivity is pretty normal... Stay still..." Hermione was now straddling him, pinning his arms to his side while caressing his face.

"Ugh! It hurts to blink, Hermione... this is just... ow ow ow..." Harry eventually settled down, although still in pain, kept silent. His eyes were watering so much he thought he might run out of tears soon. About five minutes later, the pain ended.

"Is... is that better, Harry?"

"Err... yeah. Wow, this is pretty amazing. I had no idea things were supposed to look so sharp at a distance." Harry was winking alternately with each eye, amazed at the difference he was seeing. He was staring at Hermione's face, seeing every hair on her head, every line in her irises, every little detail on her skin. Compared to his other eye, which really only let him notice that she was human, female, and brown-haired without his glasses, it was a marked improvement. He kept looking at her one eye at a time, marvelling at the difference.

"Harry, will you stop winking at me like that? It's really odd." Hermione said. She was used to, and flattered by, Harry's habit of

staring at her when they were alone, but the way he was doing it this time did make her feel rather peculiar.

"Whoops... I kind of got carried away there. Let's do the other eye." Harry lay down again as Hermione dripped one drop of the potion into his other eye. Another five minutes of restrained thrashing and cursing later, Harry was seeing perfectly.

"Thank you thank you thank you! Hermione, you've changed my life more than I can imagine... I can't possibly thank you enough." Harry hugged her, lifted her off her feet and spun her around. Letting her back down, he immediately kissed her. Hermione was caught breathless, and smiled at him without saying a word. Harry kept on going, "You've let me see things! I never even knew how much I've been missing. I can't even imagine how much of life I'd be missing without you in it, Hermione."

"My life has certainly been a lot more interesting with you in it, Harry, and I wouldn't trade it for the world."

"Becoming friends with you was the best thing I ever did. I really have to thank Quirrel for sending that troll into Hogwarts back in first year," Harry joked.

"Wouldn't that mean you'd be thanking Voldemort, as well?" Hermione pointed out to him.

"Fine, that's one reason less out of a million for permanently sending him six feet under," Harry said in a faux-sulking tone. "Can we talk about cheerier things now?"

"Well, how about celebrating your newfound eyesight? It's too late to watch another sunset, but maybe we can sneak up to the Astronomy tower and watch a few stars..." Hermione mused aloud.

"Mm... we could get caught up there. Besides, there's a much more beautiful sight I'd rather feast my eyes upon with my newfound eyesight."

"What? Where?"

"You, silly. Why don't we just stay down here for a while... I want to just stay here with you. You're all I want to see right now, Hermione."

Hermione blushed as they drew closer together. Harry watched in rapt fascination as her cheeks grew rosy, then moved his eyes to her lips, her nose, her eyes. They lay together as Harry played with her hair, stroking and inspecting locks, taking his time and combing his fingers through. Lifting one of her hands, he saw the softness of her fingertips, the lines on her palm, and the glint of light from her fingertips... he took in every little detail he never realized was there for the years he had known her. They lay together until midnight, cherishing the longest private moment they had in weeks.

The morning of the Trial of Air, Harry woke with his heart already thumping. Hermione reminded him of important things to remember for the Trial. "Alright, Corrieshalloch Gorge is about 60km long, with only 1.5km visible to muggles. I'm guessing they probably won't bring us that close to the muggle area, so the course is probably only 55km. Your Firebolt's top speed is close to 150 km/h, but you'll only rarely hit top speed, so prepare for a 40-minute long race or so. Now, the most dangerous native creatures to the gorge are griffinettes, which are much smaller than griffins, but they like to attack in packs. Your best bet for them is the Ventascindo, the Splitting Wind. I wouldn't be surprised if they told Hagrid to bring a few hippogriffs, too. If you can't stun them, just try to outfly them..." Hermione was nearly overwhelming him with information, but he knew every bit of it was important.

Hermione coached him as long as she could, until they flooed to Ullapool. From there, the champions were escorted away immediately. She had to make her way to the stands. Luckily, she had one of the best seats in the house, as Harry had given her his complimentary ticket as a guest of the champion. Harry was led to the champion's tent, where they would be told the final details of the trial. While waiting, Harry tried to evaluate his competition.

Krum was the obvious one. He was holding a Firebolt like Harry, but it looked a little different. The twigs at the back were trimmed differently, and the front handle had a double-hand grip attached. The stirrups had a closed-toe design that clamped right down onto his boots, so he could let go with both hands without losing control of the broom. It was obviously a customized version, tailored to his

preferences. As a professional seeker, there were no doubts as to his skills. Harry had seen him flying around the Durmstrang's ships masts and rigging, pulling amazingly tight turns at high speed, every morning. He obviously didn't want to let his Quidditch skills deteriorate over the course of the year. His magic, however, was equally impressive, if the rumours proved true. Krum had been a high-level amateur dueller in Durmstrang, and only chose Quidditch as his career because it had better pay. Given how a large portion of professional duellers came from Durmstrang, being one of the best at that school automatically made him deadlier than most of the people in the professional league. He would have no problem blasting his way through this event.

Harry also had a fairly good idea of how Cedric stacked up. Cedric was fairly good on his Nimbus 2000, and Harry had to admit, they were probably evenly matched in terms of flying skill. Harry was better at spotting the snitch, he had the faster broom, and he was smaller, so that made him a better seeker. With his improved eyesight, there would be no contest. That particular skill, however, didn't quite apply in a race. Harry would still be faster than Cedric, and be able to outmanoeuvre him thanks to his Firebolt, but Cedric generally made the right decisions and knew where to fly and when to dodge. He was also top of his year at school, so his skill in charms, transfiguration, and defense were all top-notch. He had no strength in particular, but was quite creative when mixing up different spell combinations.

Fleur was the unknown quantity in this event. Harry noticed the broom she was holding wasn't one he saw on a regular basis- a Clouddrunner Hurricane. Clouddrunner was a division of the Nimbus broom company that specialized in racing brooms. While not nearly as agile as Quidditch brooms, they could nearly double the top speed of the Firebolt on a long, straight stretch. Quidditch players would never use them, of course, because they'd never reach those speeds inside of a Quidditch pitch. Fleur was either taking a gamble that speed would win over agility, or she was simply more comfortable with this broom- which meant she had experience in broom racing. Either way, she was most definitely looking at flight over fight to win.

Harry was rather nervous, and once again reverted to his occlumency to help soothe himself. He systematically went over every spell Hermione had taught him over the past two weeks, as

well as the creatures she mentioned. He noticed the other champions staring at him. Krum was looking at him with a bit of amusement, probably because they shared a broom. Cedric had a kind, big-brotherly smile on his face. He didn't wish Harry any harm, but he obviously didn't consider him a threat. To be honest, Cedric knew Harry was a fairly average student, three years below him-although he probably hadn't heard about Harry's training with Moody or his rapid learning rate since the beginning of summer. Fleur was still watching him with disdain, as if he was more of an obstacle than an opponent.

Ludo Bagman walked into the tent. "Alright, Champions, the race will begin in one hour. I'll tell you what you're about to face now." The champions sat down while Bagman remained standing in front of them. "Your task is to retrieve a golden egg from a Zuu nest at the other end of the gorge. The gorge is 57 km in length. You will bring the egg back to the starting point, which makes the entire course a 114km long race."

We have to go to the end and back? Damnit, I should have seen this coming. It's probably going to take nearly an hour and a half, not forty minutes, thought Harry.

"I'm glad you all brought your brooms. I'll reiterate anyways, brooms are the only flying device allowed on this course. Touching the ground or flying above the top of the gorge is a disqualification. You will be scored by the judges based primarily on your time, but you will also receive bonuses or penalties depending on your spellwork, any fouls against your fellow champions, and any injuries you sustain. Any questions?"

That's pretty clear. Get the egg, get back, thought Harry.

"Get yourselves ready. We'll be calling you out of the tent at quarter-to."

Bagman left the tent, and the four champions settled down. They all prepared themselves for the upcoming race. Harry settled on drinking some juice and meditating some more, making sure he had all the best spells at the top of his mind. Outside, there were anthems playing and people making speeches, all of which bored him. Finally they all heard the announcement.

"...Please welcome, our champion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Cedric Diggory!" A huge round of applause came as Cedric stepped out of the tent.

"...from Durmstrang Institute, Viktor Krum!" Another round of cheering.

"...from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, Fleur Delacour!" Lots of cheers, as well as a few wolf-whistles were heard from the crowd.

"...and from Hogwarts, but competing as an independent, Harry Potter!" Harry stepped out of the tent to see an extremely large amphitheatre encircling the starting line, filled to the brim with people cheering and clapping. It wasn't nearly as strong as the applause for the other three champions, however, as it appeared many of the people had read Skeeter's article. He could even make out a few people booing him, but they were lost to the general noise of the crowd. He made his way to the starting line next to the champions.

"Champions, are you ready?" They all nodded, and mounted their brooms.

"Take your marks..." Harry leaned into his broom and tensed up, ready to blast away at the signal. The others did the same.

"GO!"

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- the pain that Harry felt from the eyesight potion is pretty much what I felt after laser eye surgery after the anesthetic wore off. Except that it lasted a week.

- Chapter revised, just spotted some spelling and grammar mistakes.

Chapter 15: The Trial of Air

"GO!" Bagman's wand emitted a bright green flare and a loud bang. Before the sound could even echo, all four champions were rocketing away. Harry and Viktor took the immediate lead, thanks to the fast acceleration of their Firebolts. Cedric followed far behind, while Fleur tailed just behind him. In a few short seconds, they had already flown past the last of the stands, and only had tracking orbs along the course to watch them now.

Krum was pulling away from Harry gradually. Despite his larger frame, it seemed his customized Firebolt let him move slightly faster. Fleur had shot past Cedric and was now right behind Harry. Oddly enough, Fleur hadn't passed them. He knew she could have easily maintained her speed and taken the lead, but she held back. Her reason for doing so became clear immediately. The first major obstacle was a tangle of vines across the canyon. They were all moving- Harry was sure they would snare him if he tried to blast his way through. Krum was heading straight to the center of the net, while Harry dove down to the bottom to avoid it completely.

"Incendio!" Krum let off a powerful flame hex that cut straight through the center of the mass of vines. As soon as the flames abated, the vines quickly began to regrow. Fleur took the opportunity to catch up to Krum and squeeze in behind him without wasting her strength, while Harry dropped behind from taking the longer route. So that's what she's planning, thought Harry. Let Krum do all the work first, huh? He tried to keep up with the two of them, but they were pulling further ahead. He heard another Incendio shouted behind him. Apparently Cedric had chosen to fly straight through as well, and wasn't far behind. Pouring on the speed, Harry pushed his broom to the limit to outrun Cedric, and tried not to let Fleur or Krum out of sight.

A few minutes later, he had run into the next obstacle- thick, heavy trunks of trees were splayed across the gorge for quite a distance. Even the Bulgarian powerhouse would have trouble blasting his way through all of them- the only choice was to squeeze through the tangled maze. He saw Krum already halfway through, while Fleur lagged behind considerably. Her broom was made for wide, banking, high-speed turns, not rapid and jerky movements. She was using a combination of reductors and manoeuvring to try to maintain her speed and fly as straight as possible. Harry caught up to her quickly

and began nimbly swerving past the thick logs. Cedric followed, and both managed to leapfrog ahead of the French witch.

As soon as they emerged from the last of the woodwork, it was apparent Krum was very busy- he had stirred up a harpy nest, apparently, and several were chasing him down. They were shrieking and warning the other nests further ahead. He was rapidly firing stunning spells, forcing many of the harpies to dive out of his path, but many came at him from above, below, and beside him. While casting, he was slamming them left and right with his body. Harry and Cedric both knew they would have just as much trouble trying to take them alone as well, and decided to help Krum. Harry sent a wind-splitter to throw some of the harpies off balance, while Cedric cast a reductor at the side of the cliff. The blast of pebbles scared off a few of the creatures, and all three kept together, flying as a group to get through the mass of vicious avians. Harry suddenly felt something approach- looking around, he felt a sudden gust of wind and saw a slight shimmer as something moved past him. Fleur had decided to disillusion herself and fly past all three at top speed while the harpies were distracted. She's a sneaky one, Harry thought with some annoyance. She's more of a Slytherin than any of the Slytherins in Hogwarts.

Harry was the first to break away from the group as they were nearing the last of the nests. Confident in his dodging skills and thankful for his small size, he took on the last few approaching harpies by himself, evading all their attacks and leaving Krum and Cedric behind. Fleur had raced so far ahead he couldn't see her any more. He couldn't let her take a bigger lead. Thankfully, the next leg of the canyon had a fair bit of twists and turns, so Fleur would be having trouble maintaining her top speed. Another five minutes later or so, Krum had once again caught up to Harry and was about to pass him again, with Cedric lagging far behind. Up ahead, gorge became a much narrower ravine. There was barely any room to move left or right- dodging up and down were the only options. Krum, seeing what lay ahead, quickly moved above Harry just before he entered the next section.

Thankfully, it was a relatively straight ravine, and Harry could see the end of it in the distance. Unfortunately, it was also home to Echoscreamer Bats, and several carnivorous spiders were known to make webs in the area. The bats loved cramped spaces with solid, echoing walls- they could scream magically enhanced voices that

perfectly resonated with their environment to instantly deafen and daze anyone who trespassed into their territory. It seemed that Fleur had gotten past them without difficulty, but given the number of broken spiderwebs, she had to deal with the spiders herself. Krum flew as fast as he could, careful not to scrape the walls. Harry did the same. However, about three-quarters of the way through, Krum suddenly rose to the top of the ravine and cast a silent Reducto above Harry's head. A shower of rocks pelted Harry as he desperately wiggled left and right, casting his shield charm to prevent the rocks from hitting him. His banging against the sides of the ravine bruised his shoulders and knees badly, while Krum shot ahead without so much as a scratch. Harry could hear a few shrieks of the bats as they awoke. He began to hear the din of the bats get louder and louder as they synchronized their voices. The pain in his ears quickly grew to the point where he was beginning to feel disoriented and off-balance. What I wouldn't give for one of Professor Sprout's pink earmuffs right about now, thought Harry. Only fifty meters to go... Ignoring the pain and keeping his eyes on the exit, he flew on, bouncing back and forth across the walls, feeling dizzy.

He regained his bearings as he put some distance between himself and the bats. It seemed that, in the meantime, Cedric had once again caught up to him. Why didn't the bats affect him at all? Harry noticed him cancelling a spell on himself- probably some muffling or deafening spell. Krum was far ahead and Fleur was out of sight, so both of the Hogwarts students had a lot of catching up to do. They only about three-quarters of the way there already, by Harry's estimate. Coming around a wide bend, he saw Krum struggling against something invisible. Harry couldn't see what it was, but as he approached, he was struck by a strong gust of wind. He struggled to fly against it, and a few meters further he was hit by another gust going in a completely different direction. He was being tossed around by the wind itself. He thought back to another simple spell that Hermione had taught him only days ago. "Now, if you ever need to see or visualize the wind for something, a good smoke spell should do the trick," Hermione had said. "Fumofluma!" Harry cried out, holding his wand ahead of him. Smoke streamed out as he maintained the spell. The smoke was quickly dissipated by the strong winds, but Harry could easily tell where the wind changed direction. Keeping his wand pointed in front, he charged forward, spraying a continuous stream of smoke ahead of him. Flying through two kilometres of the insane winds, he finally saw that the smoke he

was spewing was no longer being blown away. Picking up speed, he realized he was on the final stretch- a fairly wide, open course with no more obstacles. In the distance, he could see a massive bird with its wings outstretched- it had to be the Zuu.

Harry had nearly caught up to Krum after the wind-buffed stretch, and he could see Fleur in the distance. She was holding back, wary of trying to take on the Zuu on her own. A little less than five minutes later, they had caught up, and the massive bird was in front of them. Massive, in fact, hardly described it. Its wingspan was nearly as wide as the entire gorge itself. Obviously, it wasn't native to Scotland- it was a Persian beast, revered in ancient times as a god. A single flap of its wings was enough to blow all of them back- the bird wasn't letting any of them near the nest.

Fleur, it seemed, had already given up trying to sneak past it with a simple disillusionment- it could read air currents so well, it could practically feel the champions' breaths. Instead, she was slowly approaching the Zuu on her broom, backwards. Why was she doing that? thought Harry. As he continued to approach, he saw Fleur cast a few spells, when the Zuu tried to peck at Fleur. She bolted forward to a safe distance, and then repeated. Of course... racing broom. Forwards is the only direction she can move quickly with that thing.

When Krum arrived, he went for the direct approach. He flew straight into spell-casting range and launched a bone-breaking curse at the massive creature. Amazingly, it dodged the spell and recovered immediately, hovering in front of its nest without even flapping its wings.

Thankfully, although the bird was quite large and magically powerful, it wasn't exactly magic-resistant. Direct attacks would take more power to have effect simply because it was a larger creature, but its skin and feathers didn't deflect magic like dragon scale or basilisk hide. Harry and Fleur felt the same way, and as Cedric finally caught up, all four of them decided to attack simultaneously. The massive creature would have difficulty dodging four spells at once. Fleur decided to blind it first with a Light Flash. Unfortunately, it could still tell where they all were, but it did make it easier to hit with more spells. Harry kept with stunners, not wanting to kill the creature, while Cedric attempted to slow it down with impediment jinxes. Krum kept tossing bone-breakers, reductors, and slicing hexes, but the Zuu seemed to know which spells were the deadliest and dodged

them. Fleur continued trying to distract it, conjuring some simple pigeons and banishing loose rocks at the massive bird, but it swept them all away, along with the champions, with another massive gust of wind. It wasn't until Krum finally managed to hit one wing with a bone-breaking hex that the Zuu could no longer generate its gusts, but it could still hover menacingly in front of its nest. It also seemed less nimble now, with one of its wings folded awkwardly, and it only took another few tries before Krum connected another bonebreaker with the other wing. Seizing the opportunity, Krum flew around it, and Harry knew this was the best time for him as well. The two of them had the most manoeuvrable brooms out of the four, and now they only had to contend with the Zuu's beak and talons. While Cedric and Fleur kept launching more spells to try to disable the bird further, Harry and Krum went on opposite sides of the bird to the nest behind it.

The Zuu knew that Krum was the one who had injured it badly, and decided to attack him with its talons first. Harry's relief didn't last long, as the bird turned around and decided to try to catch both of them at once, one with each claw. Harry concentrated on dodging, while Krum set another powerful spell at the bird's foot, causing it to recoil in pain. Cedric, now facing the bird's back, decided to charge ahead, conjuring thick ropes to lasso its head. He then conjured more rope to tie it to some vines growing on the sides of the cliff. The Zuu thrashed angrily, but with its mobility severely reduced, Harry could now try to grab one of the golden eggs. Diving down towards the nest and snatching the egg up quickly, he stuffed it in his shirt. He continued downwards towards the bottom of the gorge, out of the Zuu's reach as it snapped at the ropes that were tying it up. Krum did the same, and the two of them were off, once again racing neck and neck. They didn't look back at Cedric or Fleur, but they knew that, with the bird already badly injured and now partially tied up, the two of them would be gathering their eggs soon.

Another five minutes of full-speed flying across the free-flight section of the path brought them back to the windswept portion of the race. Harry pulled ahead when he used his smoke-spewing spell again to help guide him, but Krum quickly caught on to what Harry was doing and performed a similar spell, conjuring a fine mist of water instead. Harry was coming out ahead, though, as he seemed to have a better instinct for positioning himself to take advantage of the winds, while Krum was mostly fighting against it the entire way across.

Behind him, he knew Fleur had already caught up, taking full advantage of her higher top speed to make up for lost time.

As he approached the narrow ravine again, he took the higher path, to avoid what Krum did to him the first time. Knowing the bats were probably still active, but without knowing an earmuff spell, he simply conjured a pair of foam earplugs and stuck them in his ears, and then rushed ahead. This time, the sound was annoyingly loud, but not debilitating like before. He didn't feel the same nausea or disorientation as last time, so he could concentrate on tossing low-powered stunners at any little bat that got in his way. The last thing he did before exiting the ravine was take a look behind, making sure Krum was still slightly behind him, and cast a reductor.

He knew there were another few minutes of easy cruising before he approached the harpy nests, and took the time to think about preparing a strategy. Should he charge ahead? Sneak past? He hadn't practiced disillusionment charms the past few weeks. Mental note, disillusionment is very useful, thought Harry. Perhaps his best bet was to simply fly through, dodging as best he could. As he approached, Fleur rocketed past him, her broom carrying her. Once again, she cast a disillusionment charm on herself as she bypassed the harpies. Hm, if the Harpies rely on sight so much, maybe I can just blind them, thought Harry. Performing the same spell that Fleur had used against the Zuu, he shouted "Lumos Fulgos!" as he shielded his eyes. Several harpies screamed, clawing blindly in a daze, he dodged them easily, but already the ones further away were beginning to advance on him. It would tire him out if he had to cast this constantly... he decided to dodge where he could and only use it if the harpies were beginning to overwhelm him.

Several scratches and about eight flares later, he was past the harpies. Krum wasn't too far behind, as Harry heard the gruff voice shouting spells while Harpies screamed. Fleur was long gone by now, but he had to do whatever he could to fend off Krum. Coming up to the logpile, he saw that Fleur had blasted away a few more, making a much clearer path through what was originally a jungle-gym of logs. Flying through the most obvious, open path, Harry began firing quick flame spells at the logs. A few of them caught fire. Harry smiled, knowing that within a few minutes Krum would have to stop to put out a few fires to get through the maze.

It completely surprised him, then, when he realized it didn't even slow Krum down. He heard him approaching from behind... taking a quick peek back, it seemed that Krum had simply cast a few flame-freezing charms where he could, and let his robes catch fire instead of slowing down. He was desperate to win at least second in this competition. Coming up to the vine-net, Harry knew this would be his last chance to stop Krum, who had caught up to him and they were once again racing neck-and-neck. Krum sensed victory as he prepared another flame hex. Harry knew that Krum was slightly faster, and if he couldn't stop Krum here, he'd definitely lose. Thinking quickly, he cast a Flame-freezing charm right on the tail of Krum's flame hex, and immediately pulled into a sharp dive. Krum's hex hit the net, immediately setting it on fire again, but the flame-freezing hex prevented the net from burning through. Harry flew underneath like the first time around, while Krum, surprised that his flames didn't cut a hole in the net, crashed straight into it and got himself tangled.

Harry flew past the finish line without looking back. The crowd roared as Bagman announced, "...and in second place, Harry Potter! He clocks in with a time of one hour, fifty-three minutes, and eighteen seconds. This should factor very well into his scores." He was tired, his body was aching, his ears were ringing, and his throat was dry. He saw officials waving at him to go to the medical tent for a checkup, and he stumbled his way there in a daze. Inside the tent, he immediately grabbed a cup of juice and gulped it down, and immediately went for another. Four cups later, the mediwitches finally got him to walk over to one of the beds, where they closed the curtains around him as he sat down. With his head throbbing and heart pounding, he knew it would be a while before he was back to feeling normal.

The mediwitches began their checkup, immediately noticing the damage to his ears. "I knew those bats were far too dangerous! You could have been permanently deafened," one of them muttered. After dripping a potion into each of his ears, Harry almost immediately felt the ringing disappear, and some of the dizziness faded away. Looking into each of his eyes, the witches were once again surprised.

"This chart says here that only two weeks ago your eyesight needed correction, and there's no record of you coming in for the procedure.

You've done it already? And it appears it's better than normal, in fact."

"Um, a friend and I brewed the potion ourselves... and it was a different version, one that was tailored to me," Harry said. "She told me it would work better than the standard potion they give at St. Mungo's."

"You didn't see a healer about it instead? You could have gone blind, or worse!"

Harry shrugged. "I'm confident in my friend's brewing abilities. It's over, it worked, so let's just leave it at that, alright?"

Shaking her head in frustration, the mediwitch proceeded to check up on his other wounds, most of which were superficial. The majority came from crashing into the walls of the narrow ravine and scratches by the harpies on the way back. A few simple spells healed them, and a single potion took care of the light bruising and aches. Noticing a small tear at the back of his robes, she asked Harry to remove his shirt. Without thinking, he began taking it off, but suddenly realized his mistake. He quickly pulled his shirt back down, but it was already too late.

"What on earth happened to your back, Mr. Potter?"

"Nothing. Old wounds. A quick Episkey should fix up the scratch I got today," Harry tried to make up as an excuse.

"Look, Mr. Potter, everything I find here will be held in strictest confidentiality. It's part of the healer's oath we mediwitches take, I promise you that. Can you show me what it is? I need to confirm it for your health..."

"No," answered Harry firmly. "I'm just telling you now that it's not affecting my health, so please don't ask anything more about it."

"Mr. Potter, I really must..." the mediwitch began to plead.

"No, and that's final. I'll be leaving now, unless you can tell me that I'm in mortal peril unless you treat me for something?" Harry faked his anger, desperate to hide the runes on his back.

The mediwitch sighed. "Nothing more, Mr. Potter, except I just need a drop of blood to confirm you didn't take any illicit potions..."

Harry nodded, allowing her to prick his finger and dripped the blood into a vial. The witch stepped through the curtains and dropped it into a cauldron at the back of the tent, which fizzed for a little and then puffed up some white smoke. "You're clear," she told Harry when she came back. He immediately left tent, noticing two other stalls had their curtains closed as he passed by. Fleur was standing outside, waving to the crowd. Evidently, both Krum and Cedric had arrived during his checkup.

Looking up at the scoreboards, he noticed that Fleur had arrived over ten minutes before he did, while Krum was less than a minute behind- his move at the vine-net had bought him just enough time to take second place. Cedric was about twenty minutes behind Krum- having the slower broom as well as being the last to grab the egg really cost him. The final scores had yet to be announced, as the judges were waiting for all the champions to finish their medical checkups and doping tests first. Beside the scoreboard, several images were projected by large orbs. They were replays of the events as recorded by the tracking orbs to keep the crowds entertained. One was dedicated to the fight with the Zuu, while two others flashed between the various obstacles. Fleur noticed Harry had left the tent and turned to him. "Eet seems I was meestaken about you," she said. "You are not quite as... inexperienced as I first thought, are you?"

"And I thought you were just another pretty face," said Harry. "To be frank, I thought Krum would be my greatest threat in this event."

"Ah, oui. You do not know 'ow many men theenk zat of me," she said. "You cannot eemagine 'ow... condescendant zey can be when zey assume I prefer to sit een a chair all day instead of feeling ze wind in my 'air..." Her accent was slipping heavily as her temper flared behind her.

"Oh, I think I can guess," Harry smirked. "I am the Boy-Who-Lived, after all. Everyone wants to put me and my scar on display like I'm some kind of freak show. Our minister of magic keeps wanting me to pose with him as if I actually support him. Of course, whenever anything goes wrong, they're just as quick to blame me as well," he growled, thinking of his second year.

"Haha, I forget you are ze great hero of Britain. Zey expect you to be a hero again, and blame you when you are not. For me, zey always theenk I am only good for one thing. When I was ze only woman in ze tournament, zey thought I would win with just my beauty and my Veela charm."

"Hah! You wouldn't have any effect on me anyways," laughed Harry.

"Oh really? Would you like to test yourself against my allure? I have yet to meet a man who could stop themselves from grovelling in front of me if I wanted to," Fleur informed him, her lips curled into a doubtful smirk.

"Try me." Harry looked straight into her bright, blue eyes. He saw them shimmer slightly and her hair fluttered when her face suddenly seemed to take on a surreal, dreamlike beauty. Everything around him seemed to fade out of existence as he was drawn to her perfectly smooth skin, lusciously red and moist lips... This must be the allure, thought Harry, as he poured a bit more strength into his occlumency. Inside his mind, he could feel as if there were flower petals flying in the wind, floating through the clouds. He shot them down with his spaceship, and the Fleur in front of him went back to looking like the beautiful, but realistically pretty, Fleur.

"You're going to have to do better than that, Fleur." The witch was surprised, but playfully pouted as she turned up the strength of her allure. In the distance, it seemed like many of the male officials were having a hard time staying in their seats. Harry was one again shooting down blooming roses inside his mind, not letting any bit of the allure affect him. Completely ready for it this time, Fleur didn't even begin looking dreamy and Harry could look away from her easily to enjoy seeing everyone else's reactions. He heard a scuffle coming from the medical tent- apparently Krum and Cedric were both finished their checkups and were now scrambling over each other to get to Fleur. "I think it's about time you turned it off, Fleur," he said, laughing and pointing at the two older champions.

Fleur immediately turned down the allure, looking at Harry with a very curious expression. Krum recovered first, stopping himself immediately and holding Cedric back until Fleur ended her allure completely. "I haff vorked vith cheerleaders at practice vith Bulgarian team, but they never turned on full allure this close to me," growled

Krum. He was obviously more angry at himself for succumbing to Fleur than at her for using it. Cedric just kept silent in embarrassment.

"It looks like all of our champions have finished their post-race checkups and are now ready for their final scores!" shouted Bagman with his enhanced voice. The four of them were escorted back to the start/finish line, where a small stage for them had been placed. Each of the officials also made sure they had their eggs with them before telling them to go onstage.

"Last to arrive was Cedric Diggory, with a time of two hours, ten minutes and twenty-nine seconds. He will be awarded thirty-three points. Twenty for placing fourth, with thirteen bonus points for excellent use of the earmuff charm in the ravine, taking minimal injuries against the harpies, and for restraining the Zuu. Cedric was the only competitor to suffer no deductions." Images of Cedric's performance at those particular obstacles were being projected above by the display orbs. The crowd cheered especially hard the moment Cedric lassoed the Zuu, as well as when he took on the harpies by himself on the way back. Cedric simply smiled and waved without letting his disappointment show.

"In third place, we have Viktor Krum, with a time of one hour, fifty-four minutes, and ten seconds. He will be awarded fifty-four points. Forty for placing third, with eighteen bonus points and four deductions. His powerful spellwork was displayed when disabling the Zuu with the bone-breaker curse, as well as fending off the harpies. Additional points were awarded for bravery, being the first to attempt to retrieve the egg. Points were deducted for sustaining injuries in the ravine, burns in the log maze, and hitting the vine net." Harry tried to keep a straight face as he realized every one of Krum's deductions were caused by him. Krum remained as stoic as ever, only bowing slightly to the judges' table. The crowd cheered when they were shown Krum's fight with the harpies as well as his retrieval of the egg.

"In second place, we have Harry Potter, with a time of one hour, fifty-three minutes, and eighteen seconds. He will be awarded seventy points. Sixty for placing second, with sixteen bonus points and six deductions. His exceptional flying ability was demonstrated against the windswept valley, the Zuu, and the harpies. Additional bonus points were awarded for being the first to successfully retrieve

the egg and great use of simple spells." The orbs projected his modified light spells against the harpies, smoke-spewing charm at the windswept valley, and the flame-freezing charm against Krum. Bagman continued. "Deductions were for sustaining injuries in the ravine, twice, as well as against the harpies." Harry winced, knowing how much the quick exposure to the bats' screams had affected him. He followed Cedric's example and simply smiled and waved to everyone.

"In first place is Fleur Delacour, with a time of one hour, forty-two minutes, and twenty-two seconds. She will be awarded ninety-one points. Eighty points are for arriving in first place, with fourteen bonus points and three deductions. The bonus points are for her skilful use of the disillusionment charms to get past the harpies and clearing the spiders in the ravine. The deductions are for being the last to retrieve the egg as well as taking the least action against the Zuu." Fleur did have to admit that, while she arrived first, she hung around and waited for five minutes, while Krum and Cedric did most of the work in taking it down. Still, she was in first place, and the crowds cheered for her. She blew some kisses for the photographers, holding her golden egg up for everyone to see.

It took another half-hour of standing on stage and waving before all the announcements and speeches were finally over and the photographers were satisfied with photos for tomorrow's paper. They were led back into another tent, where Bagman and other officials joined them. One of them asked for their eggs for safe keeping, which they all handed over. Bagman then sat them down to inform them of the next task.

"Good show today, everyone. I dare say that if all of you can keep up this kind of excitement we'll have no trouble selling out all the events! Now, the next one is the first Trial of Champions. It'll be held three weeks from now, on December 10th. The trial of champions is going to be a simple duel, standard European Duelling League rules. You will each have three duels, beginning at eleven in the morning, with a two-hour break in between each one. They'll be held at Hogwarts. Simple enough, eh? I hope to see some action between all of you!" Bagman cheerfully left, and Harry felt an intense dread. He had just cost Krum twenty points... or twenty-four points, depending on how you counted it. Krum was also an experienced dueller at Durmstrang.

Harry walked out of the tent as quickly as his legs could carry him. Hermione was already waiting for him and leapt into his arms when she saw him. "Harry! You were fantastic out there!"

"Thanks, Hermione. You know I couldn't have done it without you. You taught me so much in the past few weeks."

"Thanks, Harry... but I was so worried when you were in the ravine! You almost fell off your broom... I'm so sorry, Harry! I should have taught you the self-muffling charm, it would have made things so much better. And I wasted so much time on creatures you didn't even face, and you were having so much trouble with the ones I forgot about..." Hermione was clutching him, getting more and more agitated.

"Hermione, you can't possibly blame yourself. The Zuu was some kind of Persian bird, wasn't it? There's no way you could have guessed it would be the big bad bird at the end. It might as well have been some North American Thunderbird or something..." Harry reassured her.

"But... I did read about it, but I dismissed the idea... and you nearly got yourself killed when you went for the egg before it was completely restrained! Harry, I shouldn't have...mmffh-"

Harry decided to stop her from talking any more, and reassure her at the same time with a kiss. "Hermione, I'll say this again. Don't blame yourself." He gave her another peck. "You probably read everything there is to know about magical birds for this task." Another quick kiss. "I can't possibly handle that much. You made good choices to leave out stuff or else I would have been overwhelmed." Their lips touched again. "I never could have done as well as I did without you, Hermione, so I'll tell you again- don't doubt yourself. You're my saviour, Hermione." He ended his little speech by locking lips once more, and neither one wanted this one to end.

"Couldn't you have at least let me get one word in?" asked Hermione when they finally broke apart.

"No, not until I was done," smiled Harry. "What did you want to say?"

"Well, I knew what you were going to say after the first line, but I decided to let you keep going," she answered. "And I wanted to let you know that you're my saviour as well."

"I'd jump in front of any spell for you."

"Well, I was hoping you'd be a better dueller than that, Harry. Let's go back to the castle and figure out a training regimen, Harry," Hermione said, grinning.

"What? Right away?" Harry gave her a pleading look, but all she did was slap him on the back as they both mounted the Firebolt, enjoying the late, sunny afternoon.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- wow, that was my first chapter without a line break, i think.
- chapter revised. A few little changes here and there, fixed up the wording in some places, nothing much.

Chapter 16: Knowing is Half the Battle

The Sunday paper arrived and all the students and staff who didn't make it to the Trial of Air eagerly awaited it. The results were splayed across the front page. Since Cedric came in last, the British had quickly latched on to Harry as the pride of Britain- making the entire Hufflepuff table extremely angry. Cedric was gracious enough, since he was expecting to lose going in. Although he was seeker for the Hufflepuffs, he only played Quidditch recreationally and was hoping to drop the position to study for his NEWTs that year. Against the best seeker in Hogwarts, and the best seeker in the professional Quidditch league, he wasn't expecting to come out of the Trial of Air any better than third. The fact that Fleur happened to be an amateur broom racer practically solidified his defeat. That didn't stop the Hufflepuffs from heckling him, though. It was easier to bear than when his name popped out of the Goblet, because now the Gryffindors (minus Ron) were all on his side, as if he once again represented Hogwarts. Harry could only shake his head at how fickle the masses were.

Harry picked up a copy of the paper out of interest. There he was, in his second-place glory, plastered all over the front page. Fleur, once again, was relegated to page three, but at least there was more text accompanying her pictures this time. Cedric and Krum received little more than stubs. Harry was proclaimed "Champion of Britain" with pictures of him dodging the Zuu's claws. However, there was another article that caught his eye.

Harry Potter: Doing Whatever It Takes to Win?

By Rita Skeeter

The last time we checked in with our dear Harry Potter was when he somehow got his name to come out of the Goblet of Fire. This intrepid reporter has attempted to secure the truth of the matter herself, but so far, any investigation into Mr. Potter's wrongdoing have been stopped at the gates of Hogwarts by Tournament security officials and DMLE Aurors. Their only response? "This is an issue we are dealing with internally."

Now, you might ask, what chance does a fourth-year have against the top seventh-years from three different schools, one of which is already a professional Quidditch star? If you're thinking the way I do,

then the answer is obvious: none at all. He still manages to snag second place, using the third-fastest broom in the competition. Praise him all you like, but bravery doesn't make you fly faster. The crowd favourite going in, Viktor Krum, had this to say: "I was caught off guard by how he used his spells against me."

That's right, folks. In this event, spells cast at another champion are disallowed. That's no concern for the young, non-affiliated champion, however. Many people in high places seem to have taken a liking to the young boy. When Harry Potter was being checked for illicit potion use, the mediwitch was shocked to find Potter was carrying something that he shouldn't have. Did she present this evidence to the officials? No, she let him go, saying he was completely clear of any prohibited potions and asked no more questions. Even more curious was this statement from Fleur Delacour, the first-place winner from the Trial of Air. "He practically looked bored while the officials were scrambling over themselves. I have never met anyone so... untouchable."

Clearly, with the judges in his pocket, the Boy-Who-Lived is turning this entire tournament...

Harry threw down the paper in disgust without finishing the article. Hermione raised her eyebrow as she quickly read through it. "Well, that woman certainly has some talent."

"And what talent would that be? I'd like to drown her in a barrel of ink..." growled Harry.

"Now, you'll just get in trouble for that, Harry! Unless you ask me for help of course," Hermione said sweetly. "Anyways, I'm just talking about her talent for completely mis-quoting everyone and twisting facts just enough to not really be lies, but say everything wrong."

Harry picked up the paper and slowly read through it again. "Huh, I guess you're right. She didn't say anything that wasn't an outright lie... just bad opinion."

"So... Harry... what was Fleur talking about in that quote, then?" Hermione asked with some annoyance.

"What? Oh, I'm guessing she was talking about how she tried her Veela allure on me. It didn't work." Harry grinned and put his arm around Hermione, as if to reassure her.

Hermione gasped. "Harry! Don't tell me she wanted you to be her boyfriend? Or maybe just a boy-toy...?"

"Oh, it wasn't anything like that. We were talking about how people just have these expectations of us, given how I'm the Boy-Who-Lived and she's a Veela. Somehow it ended with me daring her to use the allure on me. She turned it up full blast, but I handled it pretty easily."

"Harry, why on earth did you want her to use her allure on you? Were you... flirting with her?" Hermione's voice was quivering, somewhere between nervousness and anger.

Oh crap, that was a bad move, wasn't it? thought Harry. Was I getting too familiar with her? Why DID I do it? It was just to prove something, wasn't it? He looked into Hermione's eyes and saw a dam about to burst if he said the wrong thing. He felt a pit drop out of his stomach. "I just... wanted to prove to myself... that nothing could take me away from you, Hermione. Not even a Veela who was trying her hardest." He gave her a soft kiss. Pulling back, he saw her expression soften into relief.

"You took too long to answer that question, Harry," Hermione said, still a little irritated. "But I believe you," she added with a smile. "There's one part I can't figure out... how did she know what was going on in the medical tent?"

"Wait, what? Was that just some kind of test?" Harry, for a second, nearly thought he was driving Hermione away from him.

Hermione grinned mischievously. "Don't worry, dear, you'll be getting an O from me if you keep doing what you always do. Now focus, Harry. Do you remember what happened during your checkup?"

Harry remembered the incident, nearly exposing the runes to the mediwitch. "My shirt got ripped during the race... the mediwitch noticed it and almost made me take it off, but I refused. Maybe she told her about it?"

"Not if she wanted to keep her job," answered Hermione. "I don't think a journalist could convince her to give up her career just for a quote in the paper."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, I guess you don't know about the privacy oath? It's not just something they say, Harry. It's one of the oaths that all mediwitches and Healers take upon graduation before they can start work. Apart from the Hippocratic oath, there's also an oath of confidentiality. She can't willingly talk about her patients, except to the patients themselves, their guardians, or other doctors, without prior consent or else she won't be able to work in the medical field again. And it's a magically binding oath."

Harry was surprised. He never knew about that, but it just added more to the mystery. If not from the healer, where else could Skeeter have gotten the information? The curtains themselves were silenced for privacy- he never heard Fleur leave or Krum and Cedric enter. "This is weird, Hermione. I almost let the mediwitch find out about the runes. I don't know how Skeeter was listening in to the conversation, but if she had seen them, I'm guessing that would be all over the newspapers. I don't want our secret getting out," he whispered.

"Maybe we can start practicing glamours, for now. I'll also do a bit of research to see if I can incorporate a hiding mechanism into the cluster. If not invisibility, then just a permanent glamour or something."

Harry knew what this was leading to. "You'll need to read a few books about it, I guess?"

Hermione nodded expectantly.

"Restricted books?"

Hermione nodded excitedly.

"Let's go."

"And why can't we just copy all these books into your tome, Hermione?" Harry stared at the wall of books that surrounded them. It was almost like a little fortress made of paper and leather.

"There's magical protections on the restricted books. And I can only copy books I already own, apparently," said Hermione.

"Oh..." Harry sulked a little, more disappointed in the fact that his gift to Hermione wasn't quite as useful as it seemed than having to flip through a lot of books. He enjoyed being with her, after all. The downside, of course, was that he always had to make room for her insatiable appetite for knowledge. After pulling a few books on glamours and disillusionment charms, she picked up a few more on Runes as well. Then she grabbed a bunch of spell books that dealt with privacy charms and wards. After only half an hour of reading, she realized very little of it was going to help Harry in his upcoming duels, so she found a few more for duelling. Harry was currently working his way through the latest copy of the official rule book of the European Duelling League. "Isn't there an easier one to read than this? It's just so hard to understand. I mean, it's all in English, but what does 'the release of a competitor's wand shall not constitute the defeat of said competitor without the prompt admission of their incapability of retrieval...' and all that mean?"

"That just means you don't lose the duel if you drop your wand as long as you can pick it up again," Hermione explained without looking up from her book.

"Then why don't they just write it that way?" Harry let out an exasperated groan. "You know what? I think I'd probably do better just fighting the duel and hoping I don't break any rules by accident instead of trying to remember them all."

"Hah! As if you really cared about rules, Potter!" came a venomous voice in front of him. Harry looked over the stack of books and saw a sixth-year Hufflepuff he didn't know. At his sides were Ernie Macmillan and another sixth year Harry recognized from Quidditch. What was his name again? Summers? Summerby? Sommerby? It didn't matter. He needed to respond to them.

"Sure I do," responded Harry in a loud whisper. "I wouldn't shout in the library. It's against the rules." Just as he said that, Madame Pince came around once again to warn them all.

"You're not getting away with it, Potter," growled the boy, more quietly this time. "We'll find out what you're up to."

"Yeah, don't think you'll fool us just because you're Harry bloody Potter. We don't care what people call you, we'll find the truth out ourselves," said Ernie.

Harry snorted. "Yeah, you do that, just like you did two years ago. I talk to one little snake and suddenly I'm the Heir of Slytherin. Weren't you the one who kept doing all the accusing and none of the investigating?"

"Shut it! You may have fooled Dumbledore, but you're not fooling us! You probably just called off your snake and then everyone thinks you're a hero! You're not getting away that easily this time!"

Harry did his best to remain calm. "So what have you actually got against me? Any evidence at all?"

"You're taking books from the restricted section! You're probably learning all about the dark spells you can use against Cedric!"

Harry's mind boggled at the huge leap of logic that Ernie just made. Well, logic isn't one of the main traits of Hufflepuff, is it? he thought. He spoke his next sentence slowly and clearly. "You know that all the champions are allowed access to the restricted section, right?"

"He wouldn't abuse his position, though! He'd never look up illegal spells! You trying to accuse Cedric of cheating like you? You want to bring him down with you?" snarled the sixth year.

Harry rubbed his temples. He had never had such a frustrating argument before. Then again, Hermione had told him in first year that wizards rarely had an ounce of logic. "It's not cheating if it's allowed by the rules," he tried to explain. "I've seen Cedric down here a few times as well."

"Hah! We knew you'd try to rat on him like that!"

"I just said it wasn't against the rules... you know what? This is pointless." Turning to Hermione, he asked her, "Want to study somewhere more private? This is just a waste of time."

They both grabbed a few of the more important books and headed to the front desk to sign them out. The trio of Hufflepuffs followed them. "Running away, Potter? We're not done with you!"

"But I'm done with you. Stop bothering me, you're not going to find anything." Harry said firmly as he walked out of the library.

There were more Hufflepuffs waiting outside the library. Well, they certainly had loyalty- to their own house, at least. Harry had already been on his guard since the three Hufflepuffs approached him in the library. With a quick legilimency scan, he determined none of them were prepared to cast spells at him- but they all felt hostile. "What do all of you want?"

"We want you to quit the tournament. You shouldn't even be in it!" shouted one of them.

"You guys do realize it's a binding magical contract, right? I had to compete once my name popped out," Harry answered through gritted teeth.

"That's just your excuse, isn't it? You just want to steal the grand prize out from under Cedric's nose!"

"In case you didn't notice, your Cedric didn't need Harry in the tournament to lose. Fleur and Krum are beating him, too," Hermione piped up.

"Who asked you, bookworm?" snarled one of the girls.

Hermione was perfectly capable of defending herself, Harry reminded himself. Since she wasn't bothered at all by the insult, Harry did another quick Legilimency scan. A lot of them were more riled up... an actual fight could break out at any moment now. They needed to get away. Hermione seemed to have done the same, and they both agreed they should leave now. Turning around without another word, they briskly strode away from the pack of 'puffs.

"Let me handle them," Harry whispered to his girlfriend. "At least one of them's about to blow their top about now."

"Why don't you want me to help?" asked Hermione. "I'm a perfectly capable witch, I'll have you know."

"I do know, but I need practice," Harry answered. "If I can't handle these Hufflepuffs, then I certainly won't be able to handle Krum. Oh, and shield your eyes."

"You think you can just walk away from us, Potter? We haven't finished!" came an angry shout. "Impedimentia!"

Harry cast the shield charm behind him as he turned around. The basic jinx bounced off the shield, back towards the group of Hufflepuffs. There were too many there, and too little space to move, and one of the younger girls ended up getting hit by the ricochet.

"Casting spells at me behind my back? I never thought you'd act like the Slytherins," Harry said mockingly, without letting his shield down. "None of you are brave enough to challenge me to a face-to-face, one-on-one fight, are you?" he continued. "And if you were all smarter, you wouldn't have gotten yourselves stuck in this situation."

Harry didn't quite know why he was feeling so spiteful, but he had a suspicion that he'd experienced the hostility of the Hufflepuffs three times over before, but never this strongly. He could take the time to figure out what could be different this time around, but for now... "Lumos Fulmeo!" The spell he used against the harpies was just as effective inside a crowded hall. The bright flash of light blinded the Hufflepuffs temporarily. Harry immediately brought his shield back up in case any were dumb enough to fire off spells blindly, while he and Hermione both ran up the stairs to get away.

Once they were in a safe, quiet place to study, namely the Room of Requirement, Hermione opened up one of the textbooks on illusions and said, "Harry, take off your shirt."

Harry was surprised by the sudden request, but did what he was told gleefully. "Err... what do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Lie down. On your stomach."

Harry didn't know what to expect, but he didn't expect nothing. After five minutes of quiet muttering from Hermione and not sensing anything at all, he asked, "Err... Hermione? What are you doing?"

"I'm practicing the glamour charm on your back. I can't seem to get it totally right... the colour and the texture of the image always seems to be a little off. Hold still for a while."

"Oh," said Harry, with quite a bit of disappointment.

"Don't worry, Harry, I'll give you a massage for being a good sport later." 'Later' was another half-hour when she finally hid all of Harry's runes under the glamour. She then straddled Harry and began pushing her palms down into his lower back. "You know, you're going to have a lot to prepare for with the upcoming duels."

"Hmmm? Oh yeah, Krum..." Harry answered lazily. My god, Hermione's good at this. Her hands are like a goddess! Harry thought. "Hermione, where did you learn to massage like this?"

"Read about some techniques," she answered while she raked his back with her fingertips. "What did you expect?"

"Should have guessed," he muttered in response.

"Now, about the upcoming duels... I think you might have to watch out for Cedric more than Krum," said Hermione.

"What? What makes you say that, Hermione?"

"I've heard about Krum's duels. He's a powerhouse, for sure. He throws difficult, damaging spells repeatedly, with quite a bit of force behind each one. He likes to attack head-on, and few opponents can even withstand his attacks before their shields break. But with the training we've been getting with Moody, I think you'll have a better time of dodging his spells than the others. Don't bother shielding, he'll probably just overwhelm you."

Harry was reminded of the fight with the Zuu- Krum had immediately gone for bone-breakers to injure the bird instead of trying distractions or easier hexes and jinxes to wear it down like Cedric or Fleur. "But what makes you think Cedric is dangerous, instead of Fleur? She did take first place, you know."

"Fleur won because she gambled and made the right bet. Unless she knew about the course beforehand, she was hoping that there

would be more long stretches of straight flying than obstacles. You nearly caught up to her at every obstacle, you know. She had to grab the egg last because even Cedric, with his Nimbus 2000, could dodge the Zuu's talons more easily. She had to wear it down some more by herself before she could risk taking it."

Harry hadn't realized how much that had cost Fleur. She did have the fastest broom by a wide margin... but Harry had already flown halfway back before she finally caught up to him. If there were even more obstacles in the course... Harry shook his head. I can't believe I wanted the first task to be even harder!

"Now, Cedric, on the other hand, lost mostly because he had the worst broom of the lot. Maybe not a Firebolt, but even a Nimbus 2001 would have made him much more competitive. Did you remember his scores?"

"Uh, he did end with the lowest score, didn't he? It was thirty-something," Harry answered. He didn't want to think so much while enjoying Hermione's wonderfully soothing hands.

"Thirty-three, Harry. That's not the point. He had zero deductions. The only one out of you three that managed that. Do you know what that means?"

"He didn't make any mistakes?"

"More than that, Harry. It means he knew how to deal with every one of the obstacles without getting hurt. Krum's pretty predictable- he hits hard, fast, and head-on. Cedric probably knows dozens of spells to deal with every situation he's faced with. You'll probably have to use legilimency in a duel against him or you'll never be able to predict what he'll do."

"What about Fleur?"

"I can't figure her out. She's a sneaky one, for sure. She doesn't seem to waste any effort that she doesn't have to. She barely cast any spells at all during the entire race, and it was usually just a few basic ones, except for the disillusionment. I have no idea what her strengths or combat style are, but I'd guess she has a natural affinity for fire, thanks to being Veela, but I doubt she'd let herself be that predictable."

"Thanks, Hermione. You've given me a lot to think about." Harry settled down and relaxed until Hermione had finished the massage. With an hour to go until dinner, Hermione managed to teach Harry the basics of the glamour so he could re-apply it himself, and they still had time left over for Harry to give her a massage in return.

Harry and Hermione walked to dinner with their wands ready to be released from their holsters. Thankfully, the Gryffindors seemed to be on their guard as well, and the entire Hufflepuff table glared at them as they sat down. They were surprised, then, when Cedric himself got up and walked over. Ignoring the heckling from the Gryffindors, he asked Harry directly, "Can we talk? Alone?"

"You're not going to call your pack of badgers on me? I'd rather have Hermione at my side," he answered, flicking his wand into his hand under the table.

"That's that I wanted to talk to you about," he said. "And I guess Hermione should come too, I heard she was there when it happened."

Harry and Hermione got up from their seats and followed Cedric. While they were far enough away from both the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor table, Cedric said, "I'm sorry about what my house did to you two this afternoon. I didn't tell them to do it. I just hope you believe me."

"And why should I?" Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Look, I trusted you when you said you didn't put your name in the cup. I'm just asking you to trust me now," he said.

Harry relented. "Alright, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But why'd they do it, anyways? Will you tell them to stop?"

"I'll try, Harry, but you know I don't control my house. Heck, not even Professor Sprout can really control everyone. But I saw how you flew, and I know you beat me fair and square. To be honest, I didn't really care for the Trial of Air."

"What? I thought you'd try harder, being the Hufflepuff Seeker and all."

"I'm only the seeker because there wasn't anyone else to play the position. I don't plan on playing Quidditch professionally, Harry. And up against a professional player, along with the school star, I decided not to try to out-fly you guys. It's only one trial out of seven, anyways. I'll make up for it in the other events."

"You probably could have done better with a better broom, you know. You didn't have to get a Firebolt, but something better than the Nimbus, at least..."

"It was the house broom, Harry. It wasn't even mine. I'm not going to spend a fortune just for one event, you know."

"Couldn't Professor Sprout have ordered you a newer one, like the Comet 250 or Nimbus 2001?"

Cedric shook his head. "Professors can't help us other than with our regular coursework, remember? Buying a broom for the house team when there's no Quidditch this year would be pretty obvious."

"Alright then. Why don't your housemates understand that, though? Surely you've told them..."

"I have, Harry. But while Hufflepuffs are known for their loyalty... a few take it a bit too far and practically turn it into blind devotion. They started rooting for me a few weeks ago, and they won't stop even if I told them to. I'm sure you've been called 'reckless' instead of 'brave' more than once, right?"

Harry nodded in understanding. "Yeah... and Slytherins keep flaunting their pure blood, but it looks to me more like inbreeding."

Hermione added quietly, "And some people let their curiosity turn into into obsession..."

"Oh, you'll forever be curious, Hermione," Harry said. "Thanks, Cedric. I'll try to make sure none of the Gryffindors do anything... reckless to you, if you'll try to get a hold of your 'puffs."

"Agreed. Good luck with the duels, Harry." They returned to their tables to enjoy their dinners. The next three weeks, hopefully, would be a little calmer.

Calmer, perhaps, but certainly not easier. Hermione convinced Neville and Luna to help Harry with his duelling skills- part of which was attempting to dodge stinging hexes being cast at him. He found he could handle one-on-one pretty easily, while two-on-one tired him out in less than three minutes. He lasted only thirty seconds with a three-on-one. When his muscles were completely aching, Hermione gave him a Pepper-Up potion and began working on his spellcasting. At first, he blasted spells out at full power, just so he had a better understanding of his own endurance levels. Before he was completely drained, they would spend the rest of the day working on silent casting. Harry and Hermione found they both had a knack for it (or possibly prior experience) and picked it up quickly, although they began to teach Neville and Luna as much as they could. They continued this every day after classes for the rest of the week.

The first Saturday with Moody, Harry mentioned the disillusionment spell as well as Rita Skeeter's possible eavesdropping. Moody immediately began a speech about the importance of information and reconnaissance before a battle. They spent the rest of the day learning not only the disillusionment charm, but also the invisible-footfall charm which covered up any footprints if he was walking on dirt, sand, or snow. Although it couldn't stop ripples from forming if he stepped in a puddle, it was certainly useful in a lot of situations. Along with the silencing charm, it made sneaking around much more effective. Moody was also surprised that Hermione had learned how to cast glamours in a day, but she admitted that she hadn't mastered complex glamours, such as one that you would place over a person's face. He also went over several types of privacy wards, including silencing, Notice-Me-Not, muggle-repelling and wizard-repelling types. Having no time to actually learn all of them, Hermione said she would read as much as she could about them, as a few of them were in the Auror's Handbook that Moody had given them. They spent the rest of the morning trying to sneak up on Moody, who didn't even need his magical eye to spot them through their shoddy disillusionment.

The second week, they all began adding the disillusionment to their arsenal in duelling practice. Hermione, Neville, and Luna would hide in various places around the Room of Requirement, under disillusionment spells. Since Neville and Luna were already getting the hang of silent spellcasting with the most basic, first-year spells, they would silently cast simple jinxes at Harry, who now had to be

far more aware of his surroundings. In exchange, Harry practiced his own disillusionment, attempting to take out all three of them while hiding as best he could. By the end of the week, he could cast a good disillusionment if he stood still while casting it, but it would fade quickly if he moved. Unfortunately, that was of little use for a duel, and he didn't want to wreck his invisibility cloak for such a small advantage. He wouldn't be able to make use of it for the upcoming Trial of Champions, but he knew it would be useful in the future, so all of them continued to practice it.

Moody was pleased with his progress by the second Saturday, and each one of them got some practice running into the forest and attempting to hide while the others searched. They were expected to try to take down the other three training partners by hitting them from behind, if they were hidden well enough. The others, of course, were practicing spotting them and staying on their toes. Hermione and Luna both managed to get everyone- Hermione because of her proficiency with spellwork, and Luna because of her creativity. She seemed to enjoy climbing trees, apparently. Harry managed to stun Hermione and Neville, but failed to look up. Neville only managed to stun Hermione before Harry leapt to her defense, and stunned Neville in exchange. Moody was watching everyone the whole time, and thanked Luna for reminding everyone that danger didn't always come from ground level.

The final days before the duel, the four of them started practicing formal duels. Each evening, Harry would fight a duel between Hermione, Luna, and Neville in succession, since he would have to face three powerful opponents in one day. Hermione made sure he followed the rules properly- the proper greetings, the proper way to concede defeat and accept victory, and so on. They also practiced as much as they could from the second duelling book they bought in the summer, trying to tie a few basic strings of spells together. To present Harry with more of a challenge, Hermione managed to get a pair of the pink, fuzzy earmuffs from Professor Sprout so Harry wouldn't be able to hear what they were casting. Harry, on the other hand, had to cast all his spells silently. This helped Neville and Luna especially, who were still practicing silent casting and could put more power into the spells when they said the incantations. Harry was still able to practice his Legilimency, and while Luna was as hard to read as ever, he still managed to glimpse what spell Neville intended just before he cast it. Hermione, however, could duel Harry on even ground. Harry had more power behind his spells, and he did

have better reaction times, but Hermione had what seemed like an unlimited repertoire of spells to use. Her occlumency was near perfect, and Harry couldn't afford to spend any more of his attention in breaking it while he was dealing with all the spells she threw at him. Harry ended up spending a lot of time dodging her spells whenever he wasn't sure what it would do.

On Friday evening, they finished a bit earlier to make sure Harry would have enough rest for tomorrow. Neville and Luna waved goodbye as they left, leaving Harry and Hermione to relax on the soft and cushiony spectator seats in the Room of Requirement's duelling chamber. Hermione once again got him to lay down as she gave him a massage, "to work out the lactic acid, of course." Whatever the reason, Harry didn't need to be asked twice.

"Are you ready for tomorrow, Harry?"

"As ready as I'll ever be... which really doesn't say much, I think."

"Oh, come on. You've gone through this several times before. Even if you don't have the exact memories, you still have the instincts drilled into you, don't you?"

"I hope so. The problem is I can never seem to depend on them. They're more of a reflex- if it happens, it happens. At least if I do poorly, we can always go back and try again..." Harry laughed.

"Harry, we are NOT going back in time just so you can do better in a silly tournament!" Hermione gave him a hard slap on the back.

"Ow! Hermione, I was just joking!" Harry squirmed underneath her.

"I know. And this is a perfectly legitimate massage technique," she said as she slapped him again. "Stay still."

"You know, you should fight the duels in my place. You'd probably do better than I would. Would you like to take my job?"

"Do you mean your job as a Triwizard champion, or as the Boy-Who-Lived?" Hermione giggled.

"Both, if you're willing."

"Turn over," commanded Hermione, as she began to work on Harry's arms and chest. Looking straight at his eyes, she asked, "What makes you think I'd be any good at what you do?"

With his free arm, Harry caressed Hermione's cheek. "You mean other than the fact that I'd be nothing without you?"

"What? You can't possibly mean-" Harry put a finger on her lips.

"Let's see, shall we? I'm a pretty average student, but studying with you puts me above average. You figured out the puzzles to the Philosopher's Stone first year. You figured out the basilisk in second year. You had the time-turner in third year. You're teaching me everything I need to know this year."

"That's... but... you probably could have done it yourself if..." Hermione stammered. She stopped rubbing his arm, so Harry took both of her hands in his.

"That's not all, Hermione. That's barely scratching the surface. You don't just help me learn or give me knowledge. You give me something to look forward to every year."

"What? Harry, surely there's plenty of other things..."

"I do, Hermione. You're the reason I put up with all this stupid Boy-Who-Lived crap. I don't have a home or a family. The Dursleys don't count. When I finally managed to get away from them in first year, I loved Hogwarts, and this became my new home. When I became friends with you, you became... the closest thing to family I have. This past summer was the best one I ever had, Hermione. Obviously the magical world isn't all cupcakes and flowers. There's a crazy half-dead guy trying to kill me. I don't have many friends who like me for myself. I... well... Fleur kind of explained this to me, but I realized it's hard to figure out who likes me for who I am instead of who they think I am."

"You know you were doing really well with that speech until you brought Fleur up?" Hermione leaned on him, pressing her weight onto his shoulders with a devilish grin on her face.

"Um... I'm sorry? I love you?"

"I know that already, you silly." She leaned in and kissed him. "And I never realized how much I meant to you. You're really special to me, too. You were the first real friend I had. Even before Hogwarts, most of my so-called friends were... they were like Ron. They kept me around because I could help them with homework. You're the first friend I brought home to meet my parents, too. And my first kiss, and my first boyfriend. I hope you'll be my first... um... well, I mean I hope you'll be my only..." She blushed. "Well, let's just say I'll never want to lose you, Harry. I want to live my life with you."

Harry shook as he tried to suppress a giggle when Hermione struggled with her speech. He had no idea what she was really going to say, but he had a dozen ideas in his head. He settled with replying, "Thanks, Hermione. I think you've also given me the chance to, as well." Still stuck underneath her, Harry settled on kissing her hands.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The prophecy that we sent back? You know, power he knows not?"

"We still don't know who made that prophecy, or if it was really verified."

"If we didn't bother packing that info, then it probably wasn't important. I think being able to go back in time is a pretty fantastic power, and Voldemort doesn't know about it."

"You're right... we should keep this as secret as possible. The fewer who know, the fewer who can tell, after all..."

"And you gave me that power, Hermione. It always comes back to you. I'll... I'll always come back to you, Hermione."

"And I'll always be there for you, Harry."

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- well, this was somewhat of a semi-filler chapter, but there were a few ideas I wanted to flesh out a little more and this was a good time to do it. I still haven't quite figured out all the duels yet, but they'll be coming next chapter.

- chapter revised. I made a few minor changes, and I had to agree with some reviewers that the ending needed changes. I hope it's a little less narm-y now.

Chapter 17: And Fighting is the Other Half

Harry was shaken awake the next morning after an extremely comfortable night's rest. He wanted it to continue, but the voice wouldn't let him.

"Harry! Wake up, Harry, you're late!"

Harry recognized that voice. "Hermione? Why are you in my room?"

"I'm not in your room, Harry. We're still in the Room of Requirement! We fell asleep here, remember?"

Harry didn't remember, in fact. He did remember feeling very relaxed, though. "What time is it?"

"Almost nine o'clock! And you have to be at the Quidditch pitch by nine-thirty for your duels!"

Harry got the feeling he'd done this before... several times, in fact. "We don't have to pack our trunks, do we, Hermione?"

"What on earth are you... oh!" She laughed at the likeness to their time-travel situation. "No, but you do need to shower. You stink. Heck, I stink. Let's get out of this room. Come on!"

They both got up, but as they walked out the door, Harry stopped and turned back. He walked across it three times, and a new door appeared. "What room did you call for, Harry?"

"I just asked for some showers. I thought it'd be quicker."

Hermione was clearly disappointed. "You boys never think much of your hygiene, do you? What about a change of clothes? You were sweating all day yesterday and you're going to wear the same clothes again today?"

"What's wrong with that? I'm just going to work up a sweat again today." It wasn't that bad, was it? He'd smelled much worse after Quidditch practice, and he didn't really work up a huge sweat yesterday, since he was going easy.

"No, Harry, and that's final. Get a proper shower and change of clothes in your dorm and meet me in the common room, alright? We'll have breakfast together." Harry frowned as the door to the Room of Requirement disappeared when they began to walk away. Such a brilliant idea, completely shot down by Hermione's cold, hard logic. He had a very quick shower, taking only five minutes before he was back down in the common room, and he brought his broom with him to save a few minutes of walking as well. Unfortunately, he still ended up waiting, as Hermione's idea of a quick shower was about fifteen minutes long. In the meantime, he reapplied the glamour on his back, taking several tries to get it right.

Hermione was still complaining that she didn't have time to properly dry her hair as she came down the stairs. Harry was caught off guard seeing Hermione without her bushy hair. She was still combing through all of it, and even though it was a little tangled and messy, it was... tamed, laying flat against her head and neck. That one little change turned his pretty girlfriend into a drop-dead sexy one. He didn't have time to gawk, however, as she pulled him out of his stupor and through the portrait-hole. "What's the broom for, Harry?"

"I thought it would give us a few extra minutes to eat breakfast. It takes more than ten minutes to walk down to the stadium, but I can fly us down there in one."

"Yes! That means we can still have a decent breakfast!" Hermione cheered. Down in the Great Hall, Hermione insisted he eat nothing greasy- shoving plenty of fruits, yogurt, hard-boiled eggs, and oatmeal at him. Harry stared longingly at the dishes of bacon and sausage links in front of him.

"Is this what you call a decent breakfast? I was hoping for something more... meaty." Harry frowned.

"You need to eat something healthy and easy to digest. All that oil will just give you a stomachache once you start jumping around in your first duel. I should have started you on this diet weeks ago! Here, have another egg. You'll need the protein."

Harry was finishing off another apple as they flew towards the Quidditch pitch. The stadium's colours had been changed- instead of representing the houses of Hogwarts, it was decorated with the

crests and colours of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. Harry realized how rarely he actually saw the full Hogwarts crest, as he was so used to competing against the other houses. Inside the pitch, there were two large, raised, oval platforms made of solid stone- he presumed these would be the duelling platforms. Each one was about twenty meters long, but less than ten wide at the middle. Additional seating had been added on to the field, and the closest spectators would be sitting about ten meters from the duelling platforms. The judges' table lay in between the two platforms, and a small walkway connected all of them to several tents at the end of the pitch. Harry landed by one of the tents, and was instantly waved inside, while Hermione was escorted away to one of the box seats up above. For now, the stadium lay empty, but Harry knew it would be packed when the doors were opened.

Inside, he once again found the other champions waiting for him with Ludo Bagman. "I'm glad everyone's finally here," Bagman said. "You've all familiarized yourselves with the EDL rules, correct? Then let's cut to the chase. There will only be one duel per matchup, no seconds, no rematches. Your score is based on your total number of wins, and any draws will result in less points for both champions. Do you all understand?"

When they all nodded, Bagman pulled out a small, circular device with four pieces of string sticking out. He spun it around, and said, "Everyone grab one piece of string. This will determine the initial starting order." When all four of them held one of the strings, the device cracked open, revealing how each one was connected. Harry was matched with Fleur, and Cedric with Krum. A piece of parchment Bagman was holding flared up for a second and writing appeared. "So, obviously, the first two matches will be Mr. Potter against Miss Delacour, and Mr. Diggory against Mr. Krum. The second round will be Mr. Potter against Mr. Diggory and Miss Delacour against Mr. Krum. The final round will be Miss Delacour against Mr. Diggory and Mr. Potter against Mr. Krum."

Harry looked over at Fleur, who glanced back at him but betrayed no emotion. He then took notice of Krum, who was looking back at him like an animal waiting patiently for its kill. Deep breaths, he thought. You won't face Krum until the end. Krum appeared to be looking at all the other champions with the same animalistic hunger, Harry noticed. I wish I had that kind of confidence.

Cedric appeared to be handling himself well. He wasn't acting predatory the way Krum was, but he seemed to be fairly sure of himself. He was pacing around the room slowly, but held his head up and looked the other champions in the eyes.

Fleur was giving her "Ice Queen" look again, not letting anyone tell what she was thinking. Last time, she warmed up to the other champions and was willing to chat, but that was after the first Trial was over. She definitely didn't want to give anything away before the competition.

From inside the champion's tent, they could all hear the stadium fill up. Harry peeked out of the tent flaps and noticed it was filled to the brim- evidently, the Triwizard Tournament was living up to its name as quite the spectacle. Harry had never seen the Quidditch stadium completely full before- even during the final Quidditch game of the season when nearly everyone was finished with their exams, almost half the seats were empty. Part of the reason was because only two out of four houses were ever really interested in each game, but also partly because Hogwarts was seeing some of the lowest enrolment in centuries, after coming out of the war against Voldemort. Today, however, visitors from all over Britain, and some from other parts of Europe were here. He also noticed the section reserved for the press was packed- and remembering the trouble Rita Skeeter had caused him, he wanted to find out who she was.

"Hey, Fleur," he asked the French witch. "Do you remember talking to a reporter about the effect your allure had on me?"

Fleur's cold demeanor broke for a second. "Reporter? Non, I do not discuss such private matters to ze press." Her eyes narrowed into an icy stare at Harry. "You 'ave not been telling your friends that you could 'andle me, 'ave you? There is far more to me zen just my allure..."

"No, I haven't mentioned it at all... except to Hermione, of course. I read a quote in the paper the day after the tournament, that said you were talking about me... and I'm sure you were referring to my ability to resist the allure, and not... um... anything else." Cedric had caught on to what Harry was asking, and remembered the article in question. He was now extremely curious as to when the quote came about.

"I certainly do not make such matters public knowledge, 'Arry. You are saying one of your Eenglish reporters quoted me? I do not recall giving an interview or a statement for zem..."

"Then I think you should watch out for eavesdroppers. I'm pretty sure this reporter has rather unscrupulous methods of gathering her information... but I haven't figured out how, yet."

Fleur said nothing in return, only looking at him with some suspicion. The rest of the wait in the tent continued in silence, as they once again heard the opening formalities- anthems, greetings, introductions to various bigwigs and officials, and a few speeches by the bigwigs and officials. They seemed to drone on and on, but right at eleven o'clock, they called up Harry and Fleur to the first duelling arena.

Go through the motions, stick to what you know, Harry told himself as he passed through the duelling wards. On stage, he bowed to the referee, then to Fleur. He kept his knees bent, ready to dart in any direction at a moment's notice. Drawing his wand from his holster, he held it in front of him, pointed at Fleur. Fleur, on the other hand, held a completely different stance. Standing straight up with her feet together and one hand behind her back, she extended her wand-hand towards Harry with the palm up, almost as if she were asking him for a dance.

"Duellers, are you ready?" Both of them nodded.

"Begin!"

Harry began on instinct with the Dueller's Hello to see how Fleur would react while concentrating on his legilimency to predict her moves. He spread the three spells so that the silencing hex would go for her head, the body-bind slightly to the left of her shoulder, and the conjured ropes to the right of her hip. She let off a single stunner before twisting and bending down slightly, without even moving her feet and followed up with a cutting charm. The two hexes jinxes flew past her without incident and the ropes were sliced before they reached her. Harry predicted Fleur's stunner, and sidestepped the spell easily and started running towards her, attempting to force her towards the edge of the platform with the Pebblecoat combo. It consisted of a reductor at the ground, followed by a levitation charm and a sticking charm, which should have forced the opponent into a

detour lest they get themselves weighed down in debris. Fleur saw exactly what he was doing, however, and ignored the reductor, banishing the rocks immediately before Harry could levitate most of them. It cleared just enough of the rocks for her to nimbly step in between as she deflected the sticking charms. As Harry repeated the combo, she conjured a flock of birds that flew straight at him, blocking his vision and breaking eye contact. There were far too many to destroy individually, so he used the splitting-wind spell to push all of them to the side, only to see a huge fireball rushing at him. Without any time to dodge, he threw up a shield.

Harry quickly began to move closer to the middle of the arena, where there would be more area to move. The flames didn't seem to be draining his shields as fast as he thought they would, so he held it up until the flames ended. He looked around. He couldn't see her- she was probably under a disillusionment charm. Without his legilimency to help him, he had to be wary of a spell coming from any direction- and the area of the platform that would have been safest for him had suddenly turned into the most dangerous. Eyes darting back and forth quickly, he threw a wide-arc tripping spell in one direction. Seeing nothing fall down, he began to move to that side only to see a series of red and yellow bolts from the corner of his eye. Ducking and rolling to dodge them, he threw another wide tripping spell and saw a shimmer as Fleur jumped over it. There she is!

As the adrenaline really kicked in, Harry began to fight wildly. Both of them exchanged direct spells, mostly disarming, stunning, and body-bind curses. Neither bothered to put up a shield, trying instead to take their opponent down directly. Harry was having a harder time aiming at Fleur, who would only reveal herself slightly when she moved. Frustrated, he switched to conjuring water, sending a jet in Fleur's general direction, creating a thin puddle. He could see her footsteps now, but she realized it just as quickly. Cancelling her disillusionment, she pressed on the attack, launching spells faster than before. Harry could now resume his legilimency, letting him dodge with even greater ease and retaliating with a few broad-area explosion spells, which forced Fleur to either block or jump out of the way. In an attempt to keep Harry pinned down, Fleur conjured another flock of birds. Harry countered with the same wind-splitter, only to see three snakes moving quickly towards him. A normal dueller would have to deal with them individually, because they were all deadlier than the birds... but Harry was a Parselmouth. He quickly

ran towards the snakes, and hissed to them, ~Stop. Attack her!~ Fleur obviously didn't anticipate his ability, and attempted to vanish the snakes she conjured, but Harry protected them as they advanced together. As soon as they were close to striking distance, Harry dropped his shield and began his attack. In between dodging Harry's spells, Fleur still managed to vanish one snake, blast another, and slice the last one just as it lunged at her. In that short time, Harry had closed the distance between them and she couldn't dodge his spells fast enough. He threw another blasting curse at her feet and two disarming charms. The blasting curse shattered the ground beneath her, throwing her off balance, and the second disarming charm hit her. As soon as the wand flew out of her hand, Harry summoned it.

The referee blew the whistle, signalling the end of the first duel. Harry was declared the winner, and he returned Fleur's wand to her. They bowed to each other, then to the referee, and stepped off the platform. Immediately, house-elves began popping in to repair the damage. As they walked to the medical tent for another checkup, they passed by Krum and Cedric, who were heading to the other platform for their duel.

"You are always hiding some surprises for me, aren't you, 'Arry Potter?" Fleur had an annoyed, but amused, grin on her face.

"Well, I guess it used to be common knowledge at Hogwarts two years ago, but I don't think it was enough to make the papers," answered Harry. "Besides, talking to snakes isn't always something I like to advertise."

"Oh? Is there some stigma to your ability? Eet seems useful, even if it is... specialized?"

"What? You don't know about how being a Parselmouth is supposedly a sign of a dark wizard?" Harry couldn't believe it. Everyone had an opinion about it, whether it made him the next rising dark lord or if it shouldn't matter, but he hadn't met another magical who thought absolutely nothing of it.

"Did you perform a dark ritual to receive zis ability?" Fleur asked cautiously. Harry shook his head. "Well zen, eet is no more than a unique skill, is eet not?"

"Yes, I know it's nothing more than a curious talent, but others don't think so," answered Harry.

"Eet must be a silly British thing, zen. In France, people value unique and rare talents. Zat is why our 'eadmistress is a half-giant, and my father chose a Veela to be his wife," Fleur announced proudly.

Harry only nodded, completely flabbergasted by how different things could be between the two countries, separated only by a few dozen kilometres of water. The magical France seemed to have advanced almost in step with their muggle counterparts, whereas the British magicals seemed to do everything they could to resist it.

The medical checkup was quick, and Harry peeked out of the tent as quickly as he could to see the duel between Cedric and Krum. What he saw amazed him. Cedric's side of the arena seemed to be utterly destroyed- Cedric could barely get his footing as there were huge holes on the platform and lots of loose rock. Cedric wasn't letting that go to waste, however, as he continuously summoned all the loose rocks he could, using them to intercept the spells that Krum was throwing at him. Krum, however, didn't appear to be tiring, while Cedric was barely keeping up. In a last-ditch effort, Cedric summoned a smokescreen to hide himself, but Krum kept advancing and summoned a fire-whip, which he swung through the smoke at waist level. A loud crack of the spell hitting a magical shield was heard, and Krum quickly threw a heavy bludgeoner in the direction where his whip stopped. Cedric came flying out of the smoke and fell off the platform, groaning in pain. His robes were lightly scorched, but he didn't appear to have any heavy injuries. He managed to get back on his feet, although he was a little off-balance.

The referee quickly declared Krum the winner, and Cedric was taken to the medical tent to be given potions for his burns and other minor injuries. He would be spending much of his break in the medical tent, probably only getting healed just in time for the next duel. Harry had plans for spending it with more pleasant company. He scanned the crowd, looking for Hermione, and saw her descending down the stairs, against the flow of the crowd. He ran to greet her at the edge of the field, and once again took off on Harry's broom to have lunch at the Great Hall instead of the concession stands around the stadium.

"You know, it's a shame you have to duel Krum last," Hermione remarked as they dug into their sandwiches.

"What? I consider myself lucky!" said Harry. "Saving the worst for last. You saw what happened to Cedric, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I was taking notes, too. But the thing is, Krum's predictable. He fought exactly the way I expected him to in the first battle. I didn't learn anything about him."

"Oh? And what notes did you get about Cedric? I missed most of his fight."

"He's got variety. He's really good at transfiguration, too. He can perform transfigurations fast enough to mix it in along with his curses and charms." That was pretty important. Unlike other spells, transfiguration required imagery inside the mind with no actual incantation. It would be hard to get a clear image of what Cedric was intent on transfiguring with just a basic Legilimency scan. Even with non-verbal magic, most users still said the incantation to themselves inside their head, making it easy to get a read.

"So I should watch out for his transfigurations? What kinds of things does he usually make?"

"Nothing complicated. He turned some stone to solid metal to give them more weight when he banished them. He also changed the shape of the platform to help block a lot of Krum's spells. Krum did try to disable him in the beginning, but nothing would hold. I don't think you should try, either."

"Wait, Krum tried disabling jinxes? Like Impedimentia? When I looked he was just hurling power spells over and over."

"That was at the beginning. Cedric would cancel the jinxes about as quickly as he got hit with them. When Krum figured it out he just went all-out with his heavy-damage curses. I think he was trying to save energy at first, but in the end he just didn't want to waste time or end up losing."

"Any tips against him, then?" Harry didn't want to waste all his strength fighting the way Krum did. He was certain he wouldn't be

able to keep it up, either. Cedric might actually beat him in a battle of pure endurance.

"I'd say just tire him out. Use your legilimency to dodge his attacks as much as possible. If he tries to rest, then go on the offensive, but don't let him stop moving. Krum must have tired him out quite a bit in the first duel already. That's all I can say... he's a well-rounded wizard."

"I was afraid of that. What did you think of my duel? What should I work on?"

"Quite frankly, Harry, you got lucky," Hermione said flatly. "You wasted a lot of energy with the shield charm against that illusion-"

"What? Illusion?"

"Yes, the huge flames. You didn't notice there wasn't any heat? You held your shield up for a full minute against nothing, really. It must have tired you out."

Harry shifted his eyes in embarrassment. He really didn't notice... Fleur had effectively made him waste his strength in the middle of battle. "Well... now that I think about it..."

"Harry, you need to come up with a better plan. You can't just go charging in there."

"Uh, Hermione, you might not have noticed, but charging ahead is pretty much what I do... a lot... I tend to react and go with my gut instincts. When I need a good plan for something, I generally turn to you." He gave her his best pleading, puppy-eyes look he could muster.

"Fine, Harry. Just go with what I said before. Try to force him to tire himself out. If you can, banish loose rocks away from him or else he'll use them against you. Don't use the Pebblecoat combo against him, because he'll probably make use of the debris better than you can. Use your legilimency, and don't let him break eye contact the way Fleur did. Don't waste time or energy with minor jinxes and hexes, just use a few, well-placed power curses to take him down."

"Thanks, Hermione. You're a life-saver." Harry chewed happily as he finished his lunch.

"Don't thank me yet, you actually have to win the duel."

Cedric appeared to be up and about, just fine after the short break. A few salves and a dose of pepper-up potion was all he needed. They were all waiting once again in the champion's tent, waiting to be called out. Cedric was resting in a chair, while Fleur and Krum were eyeing each other. Harry stood at the entrance of the tent, peeking outside occasionally. Most of the crowd had returned for the lunch break and the next set of duels would be starting once again.

Once Harry and Cedric were called up, they faced off on the newly-repaired duelling platform. After bowing, they both assumed the same, textbook-recommended duelling stance- knees slightly bent, wand towards the opponent, light on their feet. Harry kept his eyes locked on Cedric's. He's opening with a wide tripping hex and an Incarcerous, Harry read. As soon as the referee signalled the start, Cedric opened with exactly that. Harry jumped over the tripping hex and threw the severing-razor charm, Diffindo novaculis. It cut straight through the conjured ropes and continued towards Cedric, who dodged out of the way. He followed through with another razor charm, cast horizontally and two bludgeoners. Cedric ducked low and blocked one of the bludgeoners. Seeing Harry was still advancing, he cast reductors at the ground in front of Harry's feet. Harry saw them coming, and remembering Hermione's advice, banished the rocks and pebbles away from Cedric as soon as possible.

Seeing what Harry was doing, Cedric then cast another set of reductors at the ground in front of his own feet. Harry ran forward as quickly as he could, but didn't get into banishing range in time. Cedric already levitated several chunks of stone and transfigured them into darts, shooting them at Harry. With a few wind-splitting spells, he pushed most of them off course, but still had to sidestep a few of them, ending up precariously close to the edge of the arena. Instead of banishing the rocks, he decided to switch to bombardment spells- even if it ended up creating more material for Cedric to use, at least the pieces would be flying and hopefully he would be spending more effort dodging them instead of transfiguring them. The first one sent pieces flying everywhere and knocked Cedric off balance, ending his next batch of transfigurations. Harry

continued to throw the explosive spells as fast as he could while advancing towards the center of the arena, but the spells were very energy-intensive. Cedric, seeing what he was doing, began using counterspells to intercept them mid-air. Wait a minute, thought Harry. I shouldn't be doing this... I'll tire out before he does!

He was now close enough to use the simple banisher to sweep rocks away from Cedric, so he concentrated on that. Seeing Harry's offensive attack was ending, Cedric retaliated with a combination of stunners and bludgeoners. Harry dodged them easily while continuing to read Cedric, while continuing to banish the loose stones away. Cedric noticed what he was doing and launched a mist out of his wand. Caligo Sequita? What does that spell do? thought Harry. He could read the incantation straight from Cedric's mind, but it was harder to understand the spell he hadn't studied before. The mist was quickly advancing towards him. Once again, he relied on his wind-splitter spell to push the mist off to the sides, but as soon as the spell passed through, the mist changed direction and enveloped him. He was now completely enveloped in fog, and lost his legilimency advantage. He cast another wind-splitter and saw a glimpse of Cedric, but only long enough to tell he was transfiguring something. He blindly threw another bombardment curse, following with an arcing tripping jinx and a wide severing-razor curse. He heard the sound of one of the spells impact a shield as he threw another wind-splitter. Cedric had moved! Turning around before the mist could collect again, he saw Cedric over at his right, launching a series of spells at him. Harry threw up a shield and dodged another, but he suddenly tripped on uneven ground. Keeping his shield up with all his strength, but as he tried to fend off Cedric's unending stream of spells, he knew Cedric was trying to end the duel here. He scrambled to get back up only to twist his foot on another unseen edge, and banged his elbow as he went down. He felt something pass over him and suddenly his breaths were failing. He began to hyperventilate, desperately trying to get some oxygen into his system, but it wasn't working. As his strength faded, his shield did as well, and he was struck with another curse before finally falling unconscious.

Harry woke up a minute later, lying on the platform by the referee. Cedric had dissipated the mist, and he saw what had happened- Cedric wasn't transfiguring more objects to banish at him while he was in the mist, he was transfiguring the rocks closer to Harry, making the ground around him jagged and brittle. There wasn't a

single spot of flat ground to stand on. As he got up, the referee gestured to the both of them, and Harry acknowledged defeat. Cedric was declared the winner of his second duel. They bowed and walked off the platform as Fleur and Krum were making their way to theirs.

"What was that spell you used on me, Cedric? The mist thing?"

"It was the chasing mist. It's kind of hard to maintain, and I didn't expect it to work so well against you, actually," answered Cedric. "The nice thing about it is there's no direct counter for it other than a strong gust of wind... not many people use it because blinding spells are easier, but they're also easier to counter."

"Yeah, my wind-splitting spell seemed to do something, but it kept reforming..." Harry said disappointedly.

"Ventascindo? That spell's only good against things that are flying towards you, not surrounding you," Cedric explained matter-of-factly.

"And what would be a good spell to use against it?" asked Harry.

"Oh, that would be sharing my secrets, wouldn't it? We're still competitors, you know." Cedric laughed as he gave Harry a friendly slap on the back. "You put up a really good fight, to be honest. Where did you get the idea to keep banishing all the material off the stage?"

"Hermione watched your first duel. She said you had a knack for transfiguration. Could you tell me what the spell was that made it hard to breathe at the end?"

"Well..." Cedric thought about it for a moment. "I'll tell you what it is, but not how to cast it. It's the reverse-bubble-head charm. The normal bubble-head filters out poisons and other things you don't want to breathe, letting oxygen in. I just cast a reversed version on you."

"But how did it get past my shield?"

"I kind of created the bubble above your head and lowered it down on top of you, actually. I had no idea how long you would have been

able to hold up that shield. You've got surprising endurance for a kid who's three years younger than me."

They continued to chat about their duel until they stepped into the medical tent. Harry quickly pointed out his scrapes to the mediwitch, hoping to get out of the tent as quickly as possible to see the match between Fleur and Krum. He knew the duel had started by the time he was receiving his first helping of Speedy Sports Salve, designed to quickly heal up professional athletes' minor scrapes. He couldn't hear anything inside the tent, but he was fairly sure of what was happening- Krum was going to end it quickly with heavy spells, knowing Fleur had already lost to Harry. A scant five minutes later, he was out of the tent. To his amazement, Fleur was holding her own against Krum.

She was exceptionally graceful, and she had a very good eye. Any spell she didn't need to dodge, she didn't move for, and for those that needed moving, she just barely got out of the way. It was almost like a dance for her, while Krum was moving like a soldier. He advanced, threw spells, held ground and defended his "territory" on the arena, and advanced some more. Once he thought he had Fleur pinned to one end of the platform, threw a strong bludgeoner to knock her off like he did with Cedric. Fleur, however, wasn't nearly as tired as Cedric had been, and deflected the spell. She then put up a most unusual counterattack.

Harry felt the allure hit him, even from the side of the Quidditch pitch. He could tell many of the males in the front rows of the stadium, and all the male judges, were under its effects. Cedric managed to control himself this time, being further away, and Harry blocked it out easily. Krum, however, being mere steps away from Fleur, suddenly stopped what he was doing. He seemed to be prepared for this possibility, though, and he recovered. The short delay was all Fleur needed. Casting an enormous fireball (which Harry guessed was another illusion), she disillusioned herself while Krum was distracted. He held his shield up, prepared for any more spells to come from the narrow end of the arena, and realized quickly he was pointing his shield at nothing. He turned just in time to block a spell from the invisible Fleur, but that revealed her position. He retaliated with a set of conjured glass spears, which Fleur dodged or blocked. Those that missed shattered on the ground, leaving sharp glass all around Fleur. Dropping her disillusionment again, she banished as much of

the glass as she could back at Krum, and followed up by covering herself with smoke.

Three Fleurs emerged from the smoke, side-by-side and moving in parallel. Krum conjured a metal whip and swung wide, aiming to sweep through all three of them. It was blocked before it touched a single one of them. He switched to a stronger version of the water-conjuring spell, Aguamenti Gagatsi. The water shot out of his wand like a fire hose, and he swept the jet back and forth at the three of them. They all attempted to dodge, but the water passed straight through the one in the center. He continued the spell, hammering the shields of the two remaining Fleurs, but they suddenly bolted towards him. Having a harder time trying to hit both of them as they got closer, he took a chance and launched a strong reductor towards the one on the left, shattering the ground under her feet. She was completely unaffected by the blasted rocks, so Krum quickly threw a shield up against the one on his right. Fleur appeared to be in the middle of casting a spell when a flash of light came from a mere two meters from Krum's left, stunning him before he noticed. The final Fleur disappeared as the real Fleur reappeared from under another disillusionment.

To say Krum was disappointed was a severe understatement. He seemed to be furious at Fleur, only barely restraining himself to get through the end-of-duel formalities and off the platform. At least he won't be completely focused on me now, thought Harry. Or maybe that'll just make him even angrier when he duels me...

"Harry, don't stress out about it," Hermione advised him. She handed him another glass of pumpkin juice. They chose not to leave the stadium this time, just resting on an unused corner of the Quidditch pitch and having a light snack during the second intermission.

"Easy for you to say. You don't have a crazy Bulgarian who's about to kill you."

"He's not trying to kill you! He might still be a bit upset. Just watch out for his stronger spells..."

"Just watch out? Did you see him break the wing-bones of a sixty-foot bird last month? I am so dead in one hour. Hermione, I'm leaving all my worldly possessions to you after this."

"Don't joke about this, Harry." Hermione scowled at him.

"I'm only half-joking. Well, even if I don't die, I'd like to write a proper will and name you as the primary beneficiary."

"And even on the infinitesimally small chance that you might accidentally suffer a life-threatening injury that the nearby mediwitches can't stabilize or portkey you to St. Mungo's in time, you'll just... go back to our little secret," she said, wary of eavesdroppers. They had cast a few privacy wards to keep any reporters from trying to interview them during their break, but you could never be too sure. "And if you do... I'll meet you there," she finished in a whisper.

"I'll always come back to you, that's for certain." Harry smiled as they sat together under their private, secluded, warmed patch of grass in the middle of the stadium. When they heard the call for the next round of duels and for the spectators to return to their seats, they dropped the privacy wards and parted ways.

Back in the tent, Krum was looking remarkably calm for someone who was just beaten, and who badly wanted to beat his next opponent. The calm before the storm? thought Harry. Cedric was looking thoughtful, like he was going through a plan. Fleur had her stoic facade on again. Harry spent most of his time sitting, wondering how he was going to take on Krum. I can't overpower him. My disillusionment isn't nearly as good as Fleur's. Might as well give it a shot, though, Harry thought.

The whistle for the final round of duels was blown. Fleur and Cedric left the tent, and finally, Harry could watch another full duel. Fleur once again took her odd, dance-like stance against Cedric, while this time Cedric looked like he was ready to bolt forward. As soon as the duel began, he shot off a stream of water, covering the platform as he advanced forward. Fleur, on the other hand, threw some slicing curses at the platform, creating channels for the water to drain. She let most of the spells fly roughly in Cedric's direction, forcing him to dodge a few of them. Fleur still hadn't moved from her spot near the narrow end of the platform, and Cedric was close to the center, surrounded by the water he had conjured. Fleur quickly threw a freezing charm at the water, and a few spells aimed low. Cedric jumped to avoid the spells, but in mid-air, the water froze. As

he landed, he nearly slipped, allowing Fleur enough time to throw some additional water of her own, making it even more slippery for Cedric. As he fell, he began to cast dozens of low-powered jinxes, even throwing in some stinging and tickling charms in there.

Fleur couldn't dodge the flurry of spells, and had to block most of them. Cedric continued to cast as he was getting back up and was nearly on his feet again when Fleur advanced. Dropping her shield to cast a strong fireball, she let herself get hit with two stinging hexes and a jelly-legs jinx, which she immediately dispelled. The fireball melted a clear path for her straight towards Cedric, who dove out of the way and rolled to the side. Fleur used this chance to try to end it with a stunner, but Cedric managed to fire off a freezing charm this time, causing Fleur to slip. Her stunner went wide and Cedric bought himself enough time to get to his feet. Just as he was about to disarm her, Fleur let her allure loose again. Cedric, having seen her use it against Krum, cast a Bubble-Head charm on himself, which seemed to lessen the effects enough for him to keep his mind. Fleur conjured a flock of birds as she disillusioned herself, but before she could move away, Cedric managed to get a sticking charm on her shoe, causing her to stumble on her next step, twisting her ankle. Cedric finished with an Incarcerous, binding her with ropes before he disarmed her.

So, Cedric decided to take out her main strength right from the beginning. Can I do that against Krum? wondered Harry. Krum's strength is... his strength. And his knowledge. Maybe I can try to get a confounding charm in... He felt that was his best bet. He and Krum walked to the duelling platform in silence. As he passed by Cedric, he received a pitying look from the Hogwarts champion. They both stepped onto the duelling platform. He heard the crowd roar for the final duel as the referee stepped up and greeted the two duellers. They bowed in return, then to each other.

I can do this... just blind, him, delay him, confound him. Don't get hit, Harry reminded himself. As they stared each other down from across the arena, Harry attempted as best he could to read Krum with legilimency. He immediately found himself against a basic barrier. Nuts! It figures he'd have at least basic occlumency. Krum gave an angry snarl just before the referee's hand dropped. Both of the duellers exploded into action. Krum began right away with a bone-breaker followed by reductors. Harry didn't want to try blocking them, just in case they packed enough power to shatter his shield.

After dodging out of the way of the initial flurry of spells, he went on the offensive. Running purely on instinct, he cast the Dueller's Hello again. He realized his mistake as the second spell left his wand. That combination was the most common combination in duelling- at the amateur leagues. Krum, having fought many duels in his years at Durmstrang, could tell exactly what Harry was casting from the wand movements alone. He let the silencing charm hit him, being perfectly comfortable with non-verbal casting. He took that extra second to charge up a powerful spell as he sidestepped the body-bind curse, and let loose a powerful fire-whip at the same time Harry finished casting Incarcerous.

The powerful flames of Krum's whip sliced straight through the conjured ropes and continued straight towards Harry. Harry just managed to dodge out of the way, but Krum simply flicked his wand and the whip snapped back, forcing Harry to jump again. Unfortunately, he couldn't jump high enough this time and the flames brushed across his ankle, causing him to stumble as he landed. With another flick, Krum's whip lashed down hard, straight at Harry, forcing him to put up a shield to block. That one hit nearly broke through Harry's shield, straining him as he fended off the concentrated cord of flames. As Krum pulled back for another strike, he dropped his shields as quickly as he could, throwing what was normally called a "distraction combo" at Krum. Similar to what Cedric did to Fleur when he was down, it consisted of easy-to-cast spells that used minimal wand movement to force the opponent to back down with quantity, instead of quality, of spells. Harry tried to force Krum to stop his attack, while throwing a confounding charm into the mix.

Unfortunately, Krum had seen this combination used against him many times in the past as well, and had an counter-combination for just the occasion. The March of the Golem was simple to cast but a magic-intensive combination that consisted of only two spells. Protego Progresso was a variation of the standard shield, which sent the shield flying forward, buying a split-second for the caster to drop the shield and cast the next spell: Malleossis, the bone-bludgeoner, which required less wand movement than the standard bludgeoning hex but much more power. Alternating between the two continuously would have drained most wizards quickly, and if Harry could move to the side, it would mostly render the variant of the shield charm moot. Unfortunately, with him on the ground and Krum being far above average in power, his simple chain of spells

bounced off Krum's shield and he had to throw up his own shield to block the bone-bludgeoner. He then returned to the string of simple hexes while Krum threw up another shield. By the third bone-bludgeoner, Harry's shield broke and he was knocked off the platform. Well, that was a disappointment, he thought as he hit the grass.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- yeah, maybe Harry's performance was kind of a let-down, but I have to say that he did too well in the original GoF. He either came first, or technically first in all the tasks in that book, which to me just makes the others seem incompetent, or Harry extremely lucky. Even if Barty!Moody was helping him along in the final task.

- I hope the duels weren't repetitive, either. I may have re-used a lot of spells a few times too many... i dunno. The duels themselves feel kind of short as well, but i'm thinking they'd only be as long as one round of boxing, given how much deadlier magic is than punches. Tell me what you think.

- chapter revised! I hope Harry seems a tad more skilled, with his training showing through a little more, but the results of the duels aren't changed.

Chapter 18: Scrambled Searches

"So how did I score?" Harry asked Hermione. He was still recovering from burns and a few broken bones. Even though he was hit with the same spells Cedric was, his injuries were somewhat more extensive, partly due to his smaller size and lighter weight. Stuck in the medical tent for another two hours, they finished the event without him on stage.

"Well, it was twenty-five points per win," explained Hermione. "But you didn't get much of a bonus because they said your spells, and power, were... lacking. Your final score was only thirty-two, out of a possible fifty."

"What? Hey, I'm smaller than them! And I have to say I did a pretty good job of predicting their spells and dodging them."

"Unfortunately, they couldn't exactly tell you were using legilimency, and I don't think you should let them know. Apparently they were looking for more magic out of you, instead of the muggle-ish ways of keeping yourself safe."

"It's a perfectly valid way to win a fight! Well, it's just a few stupid points anyways..." grumbled Harry. "How did the others do?"

"Cedric scored the highest, fifty points for two wins, and twenty out of twenty-five bonus points for his magic. That puts him one point ahead of you."

Harry nodded. At least that poor performance didn't put him completely out of the running just yet.

"Fleur got a total of forty-one points, and Krum got 69. He only got one less than Cedric because of he didn't have much variety in his spellwork, but his strength impressed the judges."

That put Harry and Cedric almost tied for last, with Krum a good distance ahead and Fleur was still in a commanding lead. It would really depend on the next trial.

"So did Bagman explain what was coming up next?" asked Hermione, eager to delve into more research.

"Yes... there's actually two events coming up for me..."

"What? Two trials? How's that possible? I thought there was only supposed to be one per month! Unless the one in February is going to be notoriously difficult or something and they wanted to give you even more time to prepare..."

"Uh, no, no... the next trial is the Trial of Water. I'll get on that in a bit. There's just another event before that... um... you'll hear about it in class on Monday, I think," Harry answered nervously. He didn't want to tell Hermione that there would be a fancy ball in three weeks, and the fact that he would have to open up with the leading dance with her... and he didn't know how to dance. He wasn't sure if Hermione knew how to dance, for that matter.

"What? Why don't you want to tell me?" asked Hermione.

"It's... um... Hermione, have you ever been on stage? I mean, in the spotlight in front of a crowd?" Harry tried to ask without giving anything away.

"What, are you getting stage fright after you fought three duels in the middle of a stadium?" Hermione giggled. "Harry, you can be so weird sometimes. Three hours ago you got it in your head that Krum was trying to kill you, but you go face him anyways. Now, when there's nothing to fear, you're worried?"

"That's not why I'm asking! I just want to know..."

"Fine... umm... the last time I was on stage was when I was little. My parents put me in ballet."

"Oh... so you've danced before?" Harry hoped the innocuous segue wouldn't give it away.

"Hardly," Hermione pouted. "I pretty much just stood on stage. My parents took me out of ballet class once they realized how much I hated it."

"Why were you just standing there? I thought you'd be... well, doing some dancing in ballet..."

"I couldn't do anything on stage. I was... the Christmas tree."

"Huh? A tree?"

Hermione hung her head down. "Why are you making me tell you this? It's so embarrassing! It was a Christmas story we were doing in ballet. I was so frozen on stage that the instructor ended up making me dress up as the Christmas tree so I barely had to do anything." She then added in a barely audible whisper, "And I still managed to screw it up." She almost broke down in tears, but calmed herself by changing the subject. "Forget about that stuff. It was before I really discovered my love of books, anyways. What's this extra event? You still haven't told me."

Harry saw how agonizing the memory was for Hermione. Evidently she didn't like to dance... and especially not on stage. Things were different this time, obviously. It was going to be a ballroom dance, not ballet. And she'd be dancing with her boyfriend. Was that enough to completely change her opinion? Well... to be sure, he would have to make things extra special for her. Tomorrow was Sunday, another Hogsmeade weekend... and Monday would be the New Year's Ball announcement to the rest of the students.

"Um... actually, you'll find out about it on Monday. Professor McGonagall should be announcing it to everyone in a House meeting."

"Why won't you just tell me now?" Hermione was getting annoyed.

"Um... secret?" Harry knew that if he told her now, he'd end up asking her to be his date immediately. It wasn't that he didn't want to go with her, but he wanted to do it in a better position- preferably not while lying on a cot inside a tent with his breath reeking of medical potions like Skele-Gro. "Also, I kind of have to go into Hogsmeade to run some errands by myself tomorrow..." Harry said. I should be able to order a few flowers, at least, he thought.

"What? I was hoping we would be able to get started on the Trial of Water right away, Harry! Let's face it, you don't even know how to swim!"

"I know... I'll make it up to you, I promise," said Harry. "Wait, I don't know how to swim! What am I going to do?"

"Well, I was going to help teach you," said Hermione. "But if you don't want to..."

Harry cringed. "I'll really, really, really make up for it. Really." I might have to throw in a new dress while I'm at it... in for a Knut, in for a Galleon...

Harry got up early the next morning, eager to make sure that Hermione would be delightfully surprised on Monday. I wonder why I'm putting so much effort into this, he thought. It's not even the dance. I'm just asking her to go to the dance. But then again, this is one really important dance... and I can't imagine going with anyone else. I can't give her any reason to possibly say no, he justified to himself. After getting a light breakfast, he began the long walk to Hogsmeade, alone. Along the path, he noticed a group of Beauxbatons students already on their way. As he passed, a familiar voice called out to him.

"Oh, 'Arry! Are you 'aving breakfast in ze village as well?" Fleur asked. The rest of her classmates turned to look at who she was talking to. Fleur waved him over. "You 'ave been to zis village many times before, yes? We would like to sample ze local cuisine. Do you 'ave a favourite restaurant?"

"Three Broomsticks," Harry answered immediately. There were only two restaurants, and one tea shop. He certainly wasn't going to lead these students into the Hog's Head. "Hogsmeade isn't a very big village, I have to warn you. There isn't much selection." Seeing the questioning looks on the faces of some of the students, he quickly added, "But I'm not saying it's bad. Far from it. I love coming out to Hogsmeade and eating there when I can, but you'll find that everyone goes to the Three Broomsticks as well."

"Zen we should 'urry, if it gets as crowded as you say, non?" Fleur smiled and translated for the few who couldn't follow the conversation. They all seemed to agree on Harry's suggestion, and sped up to a brisk walk.

Harry led the way through the village. When a few of the Beauxbatons girls seemed to express some curiosity as they passed Madame Puddifoot's, he quickly urged them onwards. He didn't want

to get caught inside that shop, especially not with Fleur and several other French witches. Along the way, he also pointed out a few of the other shops to them. Most of them seemed to know a few of the basics already, like the post office and Scrivenshaft's, where many had already visited for school supplies and larger post deliveries. Unsurprisingly, many of the girls also knew where the hairdressers were.

Madame Rosmerta was pleasantly surprised by the crowd of students that arrived for breakfast, with Harry holding the door for them, no less. Business had picked up a little with the Triwizard Tournament's second event. Many tourists were staying in Hogsmeade for the entire weekend instead of just visiting for the day, but fewer students came to Hogsmeade as well, preferring to stay at Hogwarts to share the excitement. Harry decided to have a second, light breakfast, while he made some recommendations for the others. It was rather difficult, given how much of the breakfast menu involved greasy foods, but everyone seemed to have a good time. When they were all finished, Fleur asked Harry, "What brings you to ze village all by yourself, 'Arry? I usually see you with your girlfriend..."

"Oh, well, you know the New Year's Ball..." Harry began.

"You are taking her, non?"

"Of course... I haven't asked her yet, though. I want to surprise her. I don't think she likes dancing, so I'll have to make the proposition... more attractive for her." He suddenly perked up. "Could you help me out, actually? What is a good way to ask a girl to a dance?"

"Well, if you will only be using me as an example..." Fleur giggled teasingly. "Begin with flowers. Always."

"I didn't think she liked flowers that much... I mean, she's really into books..." said Harry, doubtfully. And teddy bears, he added privately.

"'Arry, do not think of flowers as a gift. It is... courtesy," Fleur explained. The other girls at the table nodded. "It is much like... 'olding ze door open. Every special occasion. Begin wiz flowers."

Harry nodded in understanding.

"Now, does she enjoy chocolate?" Fleur asked.

"She does enjoy it a bit, but she's never been into sweets all that much," Harry explained. "Her parents are dentists." Seeing the confusion on their faces, he said, "Well, she likes to watch her health."

"Ah, zen just get chocolat noir instead." Fleur was practically ignoring him by now, imagining the ideal man that she had yet to find.

"All this just to ask her to go to the ball with me?" Harry was really worried that he'd been doing things completely wrong up until now.

"Well, she is already your girlfriend, non?" Fleur asked. "You would not need this advice from me unless you considered it a very special occasion, non? Is her birthday in December also?"

Harry shook his head. "No, that was back in September."

"And you did not get her flowers zen?" Fleur's eyes widened in shock and the other girls began to chatter rapidly in French.

"Uh... no?"

"Were you two already dating at ze time?"

"Yes..." Harry could sense he was about to get reprimanded for breaking every rule in some kind of secret girls' rulebook.

"Arry... what have you done on dates wiz your girlfriend?" Fleur let out in exasperation. Harry explained their trips to Hogsmeade, a few of the broom rides which he felt were at least somewhat romantic, and even let slip that they sometimes just spent an entire day together in the library. Obviously, he left out the specific dates, given how some of them overlapped, but as he went on Fleur seemed to be shaking her head in pity... probably for Hermione. When he finished, she asked, "...And zis 'Ermione, she 'as no intention of seeking out someone else?"

"What? No... she'd never. We love each other dearly."

"Well, I must say zat Eenglish girls are far more patient zen we would be."

"I... really need to make it up to her, don't I? Can you help?" Harry pleaded, almost convinced that Hermione would dump him by tomorrow if he didn't buy her a field of flowers and an entire chocolate factory. Fleur and the other Beauxbatons girls felt that helping Harry with his relationship would be a good way to see the town, so they had him take them around town while they advised him what he needed to buy.

Four hours later, with a few trips to Honeyduke's, Gladrags, Sunbloom's, and various other shops, Harry was walking back to Hogwarts with his arms full. Clearly, the Beauxbatons girls had an entertaining day with him. He did thank them for their help by buying a few extra sweets at Honeyduke's.

"Thank you for ze entertaining day, 'Arry. I 'ope things go well for you and your girlfriend."

"Thanks, Fleur. If you don't mind me asking, do you know who you're going to the ball with?"

"Non, zere is nobody for certain for me," Fleur sighed. "But I do 'ave my eye on Cedric... 'e is very impressive."

"Really? But not Krum?"

"Definitely not!" Fleur laughed. "Viktor is... a warrior. Too simple. 'e bites down on 'is target and does not let go. Cedric... knows subtlety, etiquette, and 'umor."

Harry nodded. Krum did seem to get all his joy from competition. In fact, the only time he saw him smile, outside of the tournament, was when he was laughing at Draco's incompetence. He didn't seem like the type to settle down for a quiet life with a girl, especially one that managed to beat him in a duel. He had far too much pride for that. "Aren't there any guys from Beauxbatons that interest you?"

"Oh, I am tired of them fawning over me for ze past six years. I am thinking a fresh start with new faces may help."

As they made their way into the castle, Harry was intent on finding Hermione immediately. Where would she be? His first thought was the library, but it turned out to be completely empty except for Madame Pince. He then went up to the Room of Requirement to see if she was there, but the wall didn't have a door on it. He finally made his way to Gryffindor Tower, but she wasn't in the common room, at least. Going up to his bed to drop the gifts off, he pulled the Marauder's Map out of his trunk and activated it. He carefully scanned the map for ten minutes looking for Hermione's name, but couldn't see it.

"Hey, Harry. You've got a new admirer or something?" Harry looked up to see that Neville had just walked in.

"What? Oh, no, these are for Hermione. Have you seen her?"

"Not for a few hours. Last I saw her she was still in the library. Looking things up for you and the Trial of Water."

"She was?" Harry felt his heart drop when he realized how much he had taken Hermione's commitment to him for granted. Wait, water? he thought to himself. He knew the next task was supposed to take place near Hogwarts- she didn't jump in there just to help him research, did she? It would explain why she wasn't on the map. "Uh, I'll be back soon, Nev. Make sure nobody touches my... um, Hermione's stuff," he said as he grabbed his broom.

"Wait, I think she was-" Neville tried to say, but Harry was already flying out the window.

The Black Lake was huge, forming the entire southern border of the Hogwarts grounds and Forbidden Forest. If she was studying something in the Black Lake, she'd probably left her bags somewhere along the shores. Harry began his search at the docks where the first-years' boats lay. He flew until he reached the edge of the forest and then turned back. On the other side of the docks was the Durmstrang ship. As he passed by, he saw Krum climbing up the side of the ship on a rope ladder. Was he swimming in the lake? In this cold weather? If it dropped another degree it might as well freeze over!

He gave the ship a wide berth, just in case the Durmstrang students were feeling territorial or if they decided to take pot shots with the

cannons on the side of the ship. I wonder if they're even real, thought Harry. Or maybe they're magical cannons? If they are, I wonder if they shoot out overpowered spells or enchanted cannonballs? He let his imagination run as he skimmed over the other side of the shoreline, which again turned out to be empty. Frustrated, he headed back to the starting point of his search. He'd just wasted nearly an hour searching for Hermione and was no closer to finding her. He flew back to his room, scanning the grounds like he would search for the snitch, but looking for his brown-haired beauty instead. Almost nobody wanted to stay outside longer than they had to in the cold December air, and even that final sweep was fruitless.

He was pleasantly surprised, then, to find Hermione sitting on his bed, sniffing the flowers and twirling the small gift he had bought her in her hands, unopened. The chocolates were also untouched. She was obviously waiting for him to come back before she opened anything. So much for the surprise, Harry thought. He landed on the windowsill, as somebody had obviously felt it was a little too cold to leave a window open in this season. He tapped on the window, getting Hermione's attention.

"Harry! I didn't expect you to come in this way..." she said as she opened the window for him. She giggled. "The way you tapped on that window, I was expecting Hedwig or Karris."

"Well, it looks like you already received my delivery, Hermione," he said as he stepped down.

"So all of this stuff is for me, then? What's going on? You do know that Valentine's day is two months away, not two days..."

Right, Valentine's! If I'm doing this much to take her to the ball, will I have to top that for Valentine's day? Harry realized with horror. "Um... I wanted this to be a surprise, but..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Hermione quickly rearranged everything the way she found it. "You can still surprise me, you know. I have no idea what all this is about." She gleefully hopped back on the bed, awaiting his answer.

"Well, you know how I told you yesterday that there were going to be another event, right?"

"Yes, but all this seems a little personal, doesn't it? I thought you said this would be an event for the Triwizard Tournament."

"It is! I was going to wait till tomorrow when everybody else would know, but I might as well ask now. Hermione, there's going to be a fancy ball on New Year's Eve. W-would you... do me the honor o-of being my date?"

"Harry! You did all this just to ask me out on a date? What's gotten into you? Of course I'd love to go to the ball with you! Why are you so nervous about it?"

"Wait, I haven't explained all of it yet. We'll be the opening act. The four champions will be the first on the dance floor, and everyone will be watching us..."

Hermione barely hesitated at all when she answered, "That doesn't matter, I'll be up there with you! I mean, I don't know how to dance, but it should still be a lot of fun!"

"Wait, you don't know how to dance? You told me you were in ballet when you were younger..."

"Harry, there's a world of difference between ballet and the waltz," Hermione told him. "And I already told you, I hated it. The only time I was on stage, I played a tree."

"But you don't mind being in the spotlight dancing with me?" Harry was a little relieved, but confused.

"Of course not! All the other girls in the ballet class made fun of me... but this time, I'll be dancing with you!" She gave him a wide smile.

"But... I don't know how to dance, either. I might end up making you look like a fool."

"Not before you make yourself look like a fool, and at least then we'll share the experience," Hermione laughed. "Is this why you bought all this? Just because you were afraid I would say no? Harry, were you trying to bribe me?" She gave him a disapproving look.

"I'm sorry! I mean, no! That's not the only reason. Well, when Fleur explained it, it made sense..."

"What is it with that girl?" Hermione put on her annoyed face again. "If I didn't know better, I'd think she was trying to snatch you away from me."

"She's... actually interested in Cedric. She told me in Hogsmeade. Anyways, when she heard about what a horrible boyfriend I've been, she and her friends suggested that I make it up to you with this date."

"How did she get that idea? You're far from horrible, Harry," she reassured him.

"Well, maybe not horrible, but unsatisfactory. At least, to her standards. So I followed her advice... and I wanted to make this date absolutely perfect for you, Hermione. You have to admit that we haven't done much together other than study and train together... and a Hogsmeade weekend or two."

"You didn't have to do all this for me!" She laughed as she hugged him. "Although, I wouldn't mind more of it... so what's the gift?"

"Open it." Harry handed the box to her. Hermione carefully took off the wrapping, making sure she wouldn't tear any of it. Lifting the lid off the small box revealed a pair of silver earrings with a hefty sapphire that dangled from a thin chain. "I was hoping you'd wear these for the ball."

"These look fabulous, Harry!" She held one delicately in her hands, still afraid to put it on. "You didn't have to do this for me!"

"Maybe not, but I wanted to. I know how much you were teased about your looks before. They might not be so brash about it any more now that everyone knows you're dating the Boy-Who-Lived..."

"What they say doesn't matter to me, Harry, as long as you still love me."

"I know, but this time, I want you on stage with me, and I want to let everyone see how beautiful you are to me. Everything they've been saying behind your back, Hermione, I want to prove them wrong."

Harry was going right into his loving, protective mode as he embraced Hermione. She let him hold her, keeping quiet as he got to play the knight in shining armour for her. A thought struck her that she couldn't keep to herself.

"You know, we'd still end up looking like fools if neither of us can dance."

"Do you know anyone who can teach us? And in less than three weeks! This is going to be horrible!"

"Don't sweat it, Harry. You've learned harder things in less time. We can always stick to something basic. We can probably ask Professor McGonagall."

"Let's do that tomorrow," Harry said as he waved his hand lazily. They lay together on the bed, munching on Honeyduke's finest dark chocolate bar, until the door swung open. Neville came walking in. Seeing both of them, he sighed in relief.

"There you are, Harry! Hermione walked into the tower almost as soon as you left, and I had no idea when you would be back. I thought it would be best if she just waited for you here."

"Thanks Nev, I think it did turn out to be the best." Harry smiled at him. "Want some chocolate?"

"Thanks," Neville said as he took a piece. "I'm just glad you two found each other. Where did you go, Harry?"

"Oh, when you mentioned that Hermione was doing research or something for the Trial of Water, I thought she might have gone down to the Black Lake... I flew around there, but didn't see her." Turning to Hermione, he asked, "Where did you go, anyways?"

"Room of Requirement. You didn't think I'd be crazy enough to jump in the lake when it's this cold out, did you?" Seeing Harry dart his eyes away, she laughed. "You did! Oh, Harry, there's far better ways to learn how to swim, you know!"

"Wait, you were in the Room? But why didn't I see a door? And what kind of room did you make?"

"A swimming pool, obviously. Heated water, at the perfect temperature, of course. I... uh... kept the door hidden and locked because I was kind of afraid that someone would find me, actually."

"Why?"

"Uh..." Hermione glanced nervously at Neville. "I was wearing a bikini."

Harry's eyes bulged out as he imagined Hermione wearing the skimpy swimwear. Neville just looked confused. "What's a bikini?"

"It's a muggle thing. I didn't want anyone walking in on me because, well, you know how old-fashioned wizarding society is..." Harry was still silent, his imagination running wild. Hermione punched him in the arm. "Harry, if you stop daydreaming for a second I'll actually bring you there with me. You need to get started on swimming lessons."

Harry's mouth hung agape until he finally managed to say, "But I don't have a swimsuit..."

Hermione leaned in and whispered, "Neither did I. I wasn't expecting to go swimming at school, you know, so I just transfigured my bra and knickers."

Harry's lips curved into a dumb smile as his eyes glazed over. "Uh... how... when... when?" he managed to ask.

"Well, swimming takes quite a bit of effort to learn, so I think we'll have to practice every day for the next month..."

Harry let out a little gurgle of happiness as he stared at the ceiling. Neville looked curiously at him. "You know, if he has to swim for the next trial, why doesn't he try some gillyweed?"

Hermione was surprised that Neville had mentioned something she'd never heard of before... not in this lifetime, at least. "What does gillyweed do?"

"Oh, it kind of turns you into a merperson temporarily. Well, you don't get the fish tail, but you do grow gills and fins on your feet, and you'll be much more comfortable with the water temperature and

stuff. It's only found in the Middle East, though, so it might be hard to get," Neville explained.

"Thanks, Neville! That might be just what he needs! Although, I would still like to give him swimming lessons, just in case the effects of the gillyweed don't last long enough." That was more of an excuse, however, as she fully intended to taunt and tantalize Harry with her newfound power.

"I'll see if I can order some with the same company that I used for the eyesight potion," Harry said as he finally recovered.

"Welcome back, Harry," Neville chuckled. "Seriously, what made you drool like that? Does it have something to do with that bikini thing Hermione mentioned?"

Hermione gave him a wicked smile, and said, "You know what, Neville? Meet us in the Room of Requirement after class, just like we did with Harry's duelling training. Bring Luna, of course."

The next morning, when Harry woke up he already couldn't wait for classes to finish. Down in the Great Hall, he noticed something odd-people weren't looking at him with as much hostility as before. Some of the Ravenclaws, who had been mostly cold and indifferent. The Hufflepuffs were the biggest change, by far. For the past few weeks before the duels, they were still unfriendly, but restrained, thanks to Cedric. This morning a few of them seemed apologetic. As he made his way to the Gryffindor table, he overheard a few conversations.

"...best Defense professor in five years, and friendlier than Moody..."

"...says that Dumbledore would let him become one? He's fought two wars!"

"What a load of bollocks. He saved that girl, didn't he?"

He sat down, wondering what was going on. Fred walked up to him, saying, "Don't worry, Harry. We've always known that Skeeter was a bit daft."

"Yeah, if you really were a dark lord you'd have recruited us to be your lieutenants of chaos!" added George.

"By the way, are you hiring?"

"It's never too early to start recruitment, you know."

"What's going on, guys?" Harry was still confused. Hermione arrived just then, as the twins made room for her to sit down beside Harry.

"Ah, the Dark Lady has arrived!"

Hermione shook her head in amusement as she sat. "I forgot to tell you about it yesterday in all the excitement," she said. "Rita's written another article."

"Really? And, by the twins' reaction, I'm supposed to be some dark lord or something? But that's making everyone else friendlier to me?"

"Well, she did say a few outlandish things, as usual... but most of the students know it's wrong. I can't say the same about their parents, or the general public, though..."

"Well, are you going to show it to me, or not?" Harry was getting impatient. Hermione handed him a copy of yesterday's paper.

Dark Lord Slayer or Competitor?

By Rita Skeeter

Everybody knows the story of the Boy-Who-Lived, defeater of the Dark Lord. Has anyone ever figured out how he managed to do it, though? The official story is that he survived a killing curse, which reflected back on the Dark Lord. Remarkable, you may say, since no human has ever survived, and even more so as a baby. But wait! What else can survive this darkest of dark curses? Even a unicorn, one of the purest of light creatures will fall to the glowing green light. However, the darkest of creatures- Dementors- can survive it. Did we defeat fire with fire, a dark lord with another dark lord?

Why did You-Know-Who choose to personally attack a mere baby, when he had scores of Death Eaters to do it for him? Harry Potter was no mere baby, as we all know now in hindsight. He did, however, bare his fangs yesterday in the Trial of Champions. What most people thought was a good Confundus charm to turn the

conjured snakes onto his competitor, this clever reporter discovered was a far more sinister ability: Harry Potter is a Parselmouth!

"Yeah, Harry Potter's a Parselmouth. We found out about two years ago," explains Mr. Finch-Fletchley, who had a close, personal encounter with a snake that Harry Potter commanded in his second year. Even a young girl of the Weasley clan was kidnapped that year, but she refused to comment about her experience. When the name Harry Potter was mentioned, she ran away in fear. Why was she so afraid to answer a few questions? It could very well be that she has nowhere else to turn to. The highest authority in Hogwarts is, of course, Albus Dumbledore- but can we trust him to rein in Harry Potter?

"Dumbledore's daft, I tell you. He hired a werewolf last year to teach us! I was so afraid I would be bitten every time I sat in that class," Miss Parkinson had to say about her experience. Mr. Lupin, as some of you may remember, was sacked at the end of last year after his dark nature was publicly revealed.

"I was almost killed by this evil creature in our Magical Creatures class, and Dumbledore just lets it fly away! My father tried to make sure justice was done, but the old goat kept getting in his way at every turn," the young Mr. Malfoy told us. "He's rarely on our side. He certainly likes Potter, though." As the Triwizard Tournament continues, Dumbledore appears to continue giving Mr. Potter free reign in the school, ignoring his blatant wrongdoing or even disqualifying him from the tournament. Without any proper discipline, we could very well be looking at another dark wizard within the decade.

"You have got to be kidding me," Harry said in dismay.

"Nope, that was written in the Sunday Prophet for everyone to see," Hermione told him.

"Don't worry, Harry, almost everyone else sees it's just trying to be sensational," Neville reassured him. "Nobody here really believes it- I mean, Lupin was the best Defense teacher we had! Better than Lockhart, for sure."

"Oh, if you thought Lockhart was bad, you should have seen Professor Dimplewit. At least Lockhart knew which end of his wand

the spells came out of, even if he couldn't actually cast any," Alicia commented from across the table.

"And everyone's already heard the story of how Malfoy got scratched by a Hippogriff and went crying to his daddy," snapped Ginny, angrily. "I can't believe she'd still put me in the article when I tried to ignore her!"

"Still, I think we need to keep an eye out for this woman. She gets inside with the press pass, doesn't she? We'll have to watch out for her in the next event," Harry said with his teeth clenched. "I swear, I'm going to drown her in ink if I ever meet her."

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- Sorry, no Hermione-Luna bikini scene this time, guys.
- Also, no H/Hr/F multiship, despite their friendship. I won't be going there. Probably.

Chapter 19: You Just Have to Ask

Nearly a hundred Gryffindors waited inside their common room, wondering what the house meeting was about. Everyone in Hogwarts had been told to return directly to their dorms after classes. Few of them noticed their own head of house standing before them until Professor McGonagall cleared her throat.

"As you all know, the Triwizard Tournament has been a traditional tournament that showcases the greatest strengths a school has to offer. The champions and the trials, however, are only a part of the festivities. The next event will allow all students fourth-year and above to participate."

Excited faces grew on the Gryffindors' faces. This was the chance for the house of the bold and brave to shine! The boys could feel the competitive spirits rise inside them again, like when they would cheer for the house Quidditch team. The entire first term had gone by and there had been no Quidditch. The Tournament was supposed to be exciting, but most of the students couldn't buy themselves seats. Harry always gave his complementary ticket to Hermione. There was nothing exciting about reading the results in the next day's newspaper. They were ready to release their bottled-up cheers, shouts, and cries of victory when they faced their opponents-

"... by dancing. In just under three weeks' time, there will be a New Year's Ball, held on New Year's Eve and going past midnight. Your parents have already been informed by owl post. The Hogwarts Express will return from the winter break three days early this season, on December 30th. I suggest you use the time during the break to purchase suitable clothing. This will be a formal dinner and dance. Dress robes for all the men, and suitable dresses for the ladies."

The girls squealed. The boys gaped. A few of the older Gryffindor couples looked at each other, thankful that they already knew they had dates. A third-year girl, Janice Edgeworth, raised her hand. "Professor, did you say only fourth years and up could go?"

Professor McGonagall answered, "All students in fourth year and above are invited to the ball, along with their dance partners. Should those in third year and below wish to attend, you will need to find

yourself an escort who is in fourth year and above."

The younger girls' eyes lit up with hope, while the younger boys looked bored with indifference. A few of the older boys understood the implications- if they didn't ask the girl they wanted now, they could end up going with some 13-year-old they didn't even know. For two particular boys, being completely shameless helped them get over their nerves very quickly.

"Katie?" Fred turned to his Quidditch teammate.

"Angelina?" George did likewise.

"Would you do me the honour of going to the dance with my brother George?"

"And would you do me the honour of being Fred's date, Miss Johnson?" Both of the twins grinned widely.

Katie stood there looking back and forth between the two twins before bursting into laughter, while Angelina faced Fred and punched him in the arm. "Ask me properly, you dolt!"

Fred got down onto his knees and took Angelina's hand. He looked straight into her eyes and cleared his throat. "Angelina... will you... wait a sec, this is missing something." He pulled out a small packet from his pocket and threw it at the ground. A shiny pink powder began to fill the room, making it difficult to see anyone more than an arm's length away. The powder sparkled ten times as much when someone moved through it and also created sweet-smelling bubbles in their wake. Fred made a deliberately embellished sweep of his arm when he took up Angelina's hand again, surrounding himself in sparkly glitter and scented bubbles. "Angelina..." he began, with a voice that was much deeper than normal, and for some reason, had an echo. "Will you be my date for the ball?"

Angelina, clearly unimpressed but rather amused, blew the powder away with a quick spell. "I told you to ask me properly!" She turned and walked towards the girls' stairs, but paused at the first step. "You can try again tomorrow morning."

Katie was on the ground, clutching her sides in laughter. George looked around the room, holding up several more of the packets that Fred had used. "Weasley Wizarding Wheezes' Instant Romance Powder! Get yours today! It gives you instant, temporary, privacy, a little sparkle to your eyes even if you haven't slept in days, enough fresh-smelling perfume to cover the fact that you haven't bathed in a week, and a little suaveness to your voice for that extra edge you'll need to land the girl of your dreams!"

"Messrs. Weasley, this is not the time to be selling your joke products," Professor McGonagall scolded. "And there had better not be any love potion within that mixture of yours, because you'll be in with more than just the school if- "

"Oh, there's no love potion in here at all! Nothing of such dubious legality," Fred answered with a shocked expression. "Why, I'm offended! We're running a proper business here! Our product is only just as effective as love potion, that's all!" Many of the Gryffindors rolled their eyes in disbelief.

"We just invented this to help our fellow Gryffindors," George added. "Some people just need every little advantage they can get to snag themselves a belle, like..." he gestured his hand around the room as several boys ducked behind the chairs and tables to avoid being made an example. "Hey, where's Neville gone to? Or Harry?"

"Harry, you have to relax to do this properly!"

Harry was frozen stiff. It wasn't because the water was cold, because the Room of Requirement had created a swimming pool with very comfortable temperature water. It was because his head was pressed up against Hermione's soft breasts as he floated on his back while she supported his shoulders. Harry was surprisingly comfortable in the water for someone who never had swimming lessons as a child. When they first practiced simply dipping underwater and controlling his breath, he was perfectly fine with it. He didn't want to mention to Hermione how Dudley and his gang used to dunk his head into the toilets at school. When they moved on to floating, however, Hermione got a lot closer to him, bringing along her distractions as well.

"Just close your eyes and listen to my voice, and pretend you're going to sleep on top of the water."

Harry did as he was told, finally letting his arms and legs droop into the water, making himself more buoyant. The water washed against his cheeks, making him jerk his head up whenever it came near his nose. Hermione, having no free hands, pushed his head back down by planting a kiss on his forehead. After a few minutes of this, Harry was quickly getting used to the feeling and kept his head relaxed. He was still unsatisfied with his progress, however, as it had taken half an hour and he hadn't even begun moving in the water yet.

"I'd rather practice my animagus transformation than this," Harry sighed.

"Being a bird won't help you underwater, Harry. The Trial of Water is our more immediate concern. We'll have to put that on hold until you can swim properly," Hermione told him.

"I know, I just wish I could do more than just float here... I feel so useless right now."

"Harry, do you know how long it takes some people to learn how to do just that? Half an hour to get this far is amazing. I mean, look at Neville..." Hermione looked over to her right and asked Luna, "How's Neville coming along?"

Luna had transfigured herself a bikini much like Hermione, but complained that there was far too little material to make anything interesting, so she added extra patches everywhere, until her swimsuit looked more like a Christmas tree made of triangular pieces of fabric, all coloured in shades of red and green. She was still trying to convince Neville to jump into the pool. "Oh, it's excellent! He got his foot in the water this time. Maybe if I just pull him down a bit more..." She leapt at Neville, who was still sitting at the edge, and clung onto his leg as if she were swinging on a rope. Neville desperately wanted to keep himself out but was far too afraid of hurting Luna to try to wrench her off.

"Maybe you should try a gentler approach," suggested Hermione.

Luna let go of Neville's leg and climbed out of the pool. Neville, afraid that Luna would be doing the opposite of Hermione's suggestion and try to push him in, kept facing her as she walked around him. He was completely taken aback when she smushed her

chest against his cheek. Unfortunately, being nearly two years younger than Hermione made her far less developed. Luna looked down at Neville, who was now speechless as well as frozen stiff. She frowned. "I don't think it's working, Hermione. I can't quite do it the way you're doing it with Harry."

Hermione nearly dropped Harry into the water as she said, "That's not what I meant, Luna..."

After an hour, Harry had already become comfortable floating on his back and on his front. Hermione was quite impressed, thinking they may have done swimming lessons before, as well. Neville was finally in the water, holding on to the edge of the pool, while still pretty reluctant to dip his head in the water. The boys climbed out, drying themselves off with the towels the room provided, while the girls finally got to do some real swimming of their own.

"Do you mind if I ask what makes you so afraid of the water, Neville? I mean, we've duelled with Moody inside the Forbidden Forest, for Merlin's sake. I didn't think you'd have many fears left, to be honest."

Neville was unsure whether he should answer or not, but after taking a few deep breaths, he spoke up softly, the way he used to in the last few years before becoming friends with Harry. "I... had a bad experience with water when I was little. You know how everyone called me a squib, Harry?"

Harry nodded. "You're no squib, Neville. Maybe not as magically powerful as me, but you're a fine wizard yourself."

Neville shook his head. "There was a time when my family wouldn't even believe that. They really thought I was a squib. I don't know if my great-uncle thought it was better that I die instead of having a squib becoming the heir to the House of Longbottom, but he certainly was determined to make me prove that I was magical or die trying."

Harry's eyes widened. The Dursleys were neglectful, rude, and outright abusive at times, but would they have killed him for being a "freak?" Probably not, thought Harry. But then again, probably only because they thought Dumbledore would investigate... not to mention they'd have to explain why I stopped showing up for school. "Did... he try to drown you or something?"

Neville nodded. "One of the times he threw me off a pier into a lake. I could see him stopping my grandmother from trying to save me until I blacked out underwater."

"I'm sorry, Neville. I had no idea where you're coming from. You don't have to do this with us if you really don't want to."

"No, I think I do. I have to. I don't know what made me ask if I could practice occlumency with you, but I'm glad I did. When I came along with you to Moody's practice sessions, he practically told me that I really had some magical talents. I really need to face my fears and get over my weaknesses, Harry. Can I ask you why it's so easy for you? Have you learned how to swim before?"

"No, my experience with water is nearly as bad as with yours. My cousin and his gang used to dunk my head into the toilets for fun. It's only easier because this time, it's with Hermione, and I trust her with my life."

"Thanks. I just wish I could trust Luna that way..." Neville said wistfully.

"Well, you can always trust her to be different, at least..." Harry said before he caught Neville's expression. "Wait... that's not the only reason you're nervous about swimming is it? You're nervous about swimming with Luna." He grinned.

"I'm not sure if I really do like her that way... but it's the way she completely ignores what people expect of her and just does what she feels she should. Sometimes I wish I could be more like her. Well, not the really weird things she does, but you know what I mean. I do want to get to know her better..."

"Then why don't you start by asking her to the ball?"

"But... what if she says no?" asked Neville fearfully.

"But what if she says yes? You'll never guess what it took for me to admit I loved Hermione, Neville. I was an idiot for not doing it earlier. And with Luna, you know she'll never just say no even if she rejects you. It should be interesting!" Harry laughed at his own memory. As

long as it doesn't take poisoning himself with basilisk venom and going back in time, Neville should be fine.

"You're right... I should ask her, at the very least. Maybe at the beginning of winter break... I can get ready..." Neville said to himself.

"Why not now?" asked Harry. "We're all friends in this room. You won't have to do it in front of the school. Besides, even though there may not be many other people who like Luna as much as you do, if you don't ask her now someone else might." As he said this, he had an epiphany. Is this why Hermione wanted us to skip the announcement? So she could set up Luna and Neville? He looked over at the girls, who by then had stopped swimming. They were talking to each other, occasionally glancing at him and Neville.

"Do they have to keep looking at me like that?" Neville walked to the edge of the pool. Hermione gave Luna a nudge. The small blonde witch bobbed over to Neville, staying in the pool and looking up at him. Neville fidgeted for a while as Harry and Hermione moved off to the side to watch from a distance.

"You planned this, didn't you?" Harry asked.

"What? Me?" Hermione asked innocently. "They're the ones who are setting themselves up. Haven't you noticed how much Neville watches out for Luna when we have our practices with Moody?"

Harry shook his head dumbly. "I thought it was just because the two of them expected me to pair with you for all the exercises anyways..."

"No, not like that! It's the little things, like how he can't stop himself from wincing every time Luna gets a bruise, or how he hesitates whenever you stun her..."

"You notice these things? I kinda noticed he hesitates, but I just consider that an opening. I usually end up stunning him two seconds later."

"Well, yes, but when he wakes up the first thing he does is check on Luna as well," explained Hermione. She was interrupted by a fearful scream. Luna had leapt out of the water and hugged Neville's legs, causing him to lose balance and fall into the pool. "I guess that's that."

Let's hope he doesn't regret what he just got himself into," Hermione said as she pulled Harry to the sputtering Neville.

Two days later they saw a very irritated Fleur walk through the Great Hall for breakfast. There was something about her that seemed very odd, much like a model with too much makeup on. They could practically smell her from across the room, and it didn't smell like high-quality perfume, either. Her Beauxbatons uniform was a shade of pink instead of light blue. When she spotted Harry, she made a beeline straight for his seat.

"J'en ai ras le bol! 'Arry Potter, I was told you may 'ave an idea who made zis despicable powder?" She tried brushing some of the stuff off her uniform, but it just caused it to spread, while producing a few dull sparks and foam when she did.

For something that looked like an obvious prank, Harry knew exactly who would have done it. Then again, the twins didn't seem to be pranking all that much this year, concentrating more on their products for their new business. Since he missed the show in Gryffindor Tower, he actually didn't know what it was, but he was curious to find out. "I have a guess, Fleur. Could you tell me what happened?"

"Well, I 'appened to run into Cedric in ze 'allways. I could tell 'e was interested in asking me to ze ball, but he was a little nervous, even if 'e hid it well. I decided to 'elp him along..."

"With your Veela powers, you mean?" asked Hermione dryly.

"Of course," answered Fleur. "If you 'ad a skill zat set you apart from ze others, would you not use it?"

"It's only good for a superficial, temporary infatuation. It's so shallow."

"I know exactly what my allure is good for. It is simply ze best makeup and perfume zat even money cannot buy. A girl like you 'as never even attempted to find yourself a boy, 'ave you?"

"I don't need to. I already have Harry, and he's the only one I'll ever want in my life," Hermione affirmed.

"Do not denounce ze... techniques ozzier girls use when you are simply lucky to find the man of your dreams. Some of us must work to get the attention of our intended..."

Harry cut in before the argument could escalate further. "I'll have to admit I'm really lucky and I don't know the first thing about asking a girl out, but could we get back to the matter at hand? What happened after you turned on your allure with Cedric?"

Giving an unfriendly look to Hermione before answering, she scowled as she turned to Harry. "I was besieged! Before Cedric could answer, I was pelted with zis powder from all ze 'ogwarts boys around me! Now it is in my 'air, my clothes, and I dare not risk anything more potent zen Scourgify on my uniform."

"I'll be right back," Harry said as he got up and jogged down to the other side of the table, where the twins were sitting. "Hey guys, you wouldn't happen to be responsible for a certain pink powder, would you?"

"Responsible? Harry, my friend, our little product is raking in the coins this week!" Fred answered gleefully.

"Yeah, I think we probably should have charged more. Eight knuts a dose and we almost couldn't keep up with demand!" George added.

"It even landed me this fine woman for the upcoming ball," Fred said while wrapping his arm around Angelina.

She laughed. "No it didn't. That ridiculous powder made you wait an extra day for me."

"Well, Katie saw the effects herself, and couldn't resist my advances." George wrapped his arm around his date in a mirror image of his brother.

"You didn't even use it on me! I was just laughing too hard when you used it on Angelina that I couldn't say no." Katie slapped George's thigh. "You should consider yourself lucky that I'm a girl who enjoys your crazy brand of humour."

"Still, you can't deny the power of rumour. Everyone heard the story of the powder, and everyone saw us walking hand-in-hand the next day." Fred grinned and held Angelina's hand.

"Add them together and you have a thriving business, especially when most of the school will be going home for the holidays on Friday," George said as he wiggled his eyebrows.

"Some figure it's their last chance to snag themselves a date, so they're taking every bit of help they can get."

"Even if that help isn't exactly guaranteed to be help at all," Angelina finished for them.

"I see..." said Harry. "And this powder... is it supposed to spark and foam up? Not to mention the smell..."

"Huh? No, it's supposed to make bubbles and glitter. Although it did do that when we left a pile of it on our workbench for an hour," George recalled.

"But we measured out each packet so that it just disperses long before that can happen," Fred explained.

"And what if a girl gets hit with more than one?"

"Err... it shouldn't be too bad. As long as there was some time in between for the powder to disperse. I guess some of the prettier, unmatched girls might have some problems for the next few days," George explained.

"At least it gives them more incentive to say yes to somebody to take themselves off the market," Fred howled in laughter. "And then our product will really sell!"

The girls beside them both punched them in their arms. "Guys! That's horrible!"

"But what if that girl gets hit with a dozen of them at the same time?"

The twins' eyes boggled. "Is there a girl that popular in our school? I mean, I can appreciate some girls like Cho Chang, or the Patil twins

in your year, or even Alexandra York in seventh year, but she's already with Anzers, everyone knows that."

"You're forgetting our foreign visitors. Namely, one French champion in particular," Harry's eyes darted in the direction of Fleur, who was keeping her distance but was already plotting the twins' demise from afar. "Especially when she turns on her aura."

"I have to say, that pink really doesn't suit her," George said fearfully.

"And those sparks might be bad for her hair," Fred commented.

"Look, I'll try to stop her from killing you if you tell me how to clean it up. Apparently the scouring charm isn't enough, and those robes are probably expensive," Harry said. The twins quickly explained how to get rid of the mess, how to avoid future messes, and even handed a small squeeze bottle of cleaning solution.

"Our own invention," Fred explained. "We use it to clean up evidence quickly. Don't worry about damaging the robes, because that was always one of the dead give-aways we were up to something in our first few years at Hogwarts."

"Thanks," Harry said as he took the bottle. "You guys know you owe me, right?"

The twins nodded quickly as they watched Fleur glare at them until Harry reached her. He explained how wind spells would get rid of the powder quickly if anyone else used one again, but gave her the bottle of cleaning solution for the powder that had stuck to her robes. A few quick spritzes and the powder began to fade away, along with its effects. Fleur was pleasantly surprised at its effectiveness.

"Zis is a very good cleanser! Where did zey get this?"

"Apparently they invented it themselves, like the powder. They don't have anything against you, Fleur, they've just been selling that stuff to all the boys who are desperate to find a date."

"Oh? Zey 'ave a business before zey 'ave graduated? Ze 'romance powder' may be something out of a cheap romance novel, but this cleanser is the best I've used. Hm... perhaps I can work out a deal

with zem." She left Harry and walked towards the twins, putting on a malicious face. They were now deathly afraid that Harry's bid to calm her hadn't worked- softening them up for Fleur's business proposition.

"I can see why she told you to lavish me with gifts. She knows you've got money, doesn't she?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe. She could tell I wasn't really worried about prices when we went shopping, I guess." Harry shrugged.

"She likes to use people like commodities! Did she ask for anything in return? She tell you that you owed her for the advice, did she?" Hermione narrowed her eyes.

"What? No, she didn't. I gave her and her friends a box of sweets from Honeydukes, but that's it. Why are you so critical of her? Please don't tell me you're jealous or something..."

"No, not in the least. But she's probably got her eye on you- maybe not as a boyfriend, but maybe as a 'good friend' because she knows you'll be famous, and probably knows you're rich. Did you see how quickly her mood changed when she realized Fred and George could be... profitable for her?"

"Are you telling me I should start avoiding her?"

"That's what leaves me so conflicted. She knows how to make the right friends, if you know what I mean. She's already looking to build family alliances or something, like what the pureblood Slytherins have had for generations. I don't like getting caught up in those kinds of political drama, but at the same time, it could be really useful. Just be careful what you do and say around her, alright?"

Harry couldn't wait for the holidays to arrive, because it meant he would be heading to Hermione's home for the break. As the train rolled into the station, they saw the occasional poof of pink in the crowd. Some people were very desperate.

"I can't believe they're not just writing letters. That has to be the most annoying way to ask someone on a date," Hermione muttered.

"Some people still haven't figured it out yet. I mean, Fleur got hit with it and the next day she has a date!" Harry laughed.

"Yes, with the one boy who didn't use that stuff." Hermione said with a annoyed smirk.

"You know the twins never lied outright when they advertised their product. They simply said that certain people had used it, and they did happen to have dates the next day..."

"Almost lying is just as bad," Hermione said through gritted teeth. It certainly didn't help that almost all the girls complained about the stuff day and night for the past week to her, but at least she could watch from the sidelines instead of being a victim of its effects.

"Come on, Hermione. Let's get a compartment and make sure no single ladies are with us..." Harry laughed as they boarded the train. It was far easier to find an empty cabin than at the beginning and end of the school year, since many students chose to simply stay at school, including Neville and Luna. They decided to have one cabin all to themselves, and Hermione immediately cast several privacy wards they had practiced from the auror's handbook. After a locking charm on the door, she also cast a silencing ward and identification ward on the door. She added one-way glass charms on the windows as well, so they could still see outside and buy a snack from the trolley lady. From the other side, it would look like they had simply drawn the blinds.

Surely enough, the wards proved themselves useful less than an hour after the train left the station. Harry was listening to Hermione's stories of what they used to do during winter break before Hogwarts, and this would have been the first time Hermione had been back with her parents for Christmas since first year. A beeping noise came from the door as the identification ward detected someone they were specifically watching out for- Draco Malfoy. A few seconds later, Draco and his little posse, including Pansy, were standing right outside the door.

"Are you sure this is the one?" Draco asked.

"Of course. A few of the girls from Potter's fan club saw them go in by themselves. They shut the door behind them and haven't come out," Pansy told him.

Inside, Harry looked over to Hermione. "I have a fan club?"

Hermione nodded. "You didn't expect to be a national celebrity and not have fans, did you? A lot of little girls grew up hearing your name in bedtime stories."

"And you're okay with that? How come I've never met any of them?"

"Oh, it's not a real club anyways. Just a bunch of girls who like to get together and gossip about you. A bunch of them kept pestering me about how good a kisser you are."

"And what did you tell them?"

"I told them to mind their own business."

"And what would you tell me?" Harry moved closer.

"Practice makes perfect?" Hermione put her arms on Harry's shoulders.

"...and they're probably just snogging each other in there," they heard Pansy say outside.

"Are you sure that silencing ward is working properly?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and the locking charm, too," said Hermione as Draco fiddled with the knob. They heard him cast Alohamora to no effect.

Kicking the door in frustration, Draco said, "Come on. We can get them when it's time to leave the train." Crabbe and Goyle grunted and followed. Harry watched them walk to the end of the car, and just as they filed through the door to the next car, Harry opened the door to the cabin and quickly cast a basic tracking charm, hitting Goyle. He closed the door and locked it before Goyle could see him, if he had even noticed anything.

"What did you just do?" asked Hermione.

"Tracking charm. Since he's planning on ambushing us when we leave, I think a little pre-emptive strike is in order. It'll make it easier

to find them all in their cabin, maybe an hour before we get to London, and then we can just lock them in."

"I like it. They won't even see us do it. I really have to wonder why he's so fixated on you, though."

"I think he considers himself my mortal enemy or something, but I've got bigger and eviler fish to fry." The subject of Voldemort brought the conversation to a grinding halt. They looked at each other in silence, unsure of what to say next. Harry tried to lighten the mood by saying, "Well, maybe we should be glad that Draco is offering himself up to be target practice for me."

For the remainder of the train ride, Harry and Hermione decided to practice their animagus training again. Without the room of requirement and with little space to move, they obviously couldn't do any swimming or duelling practice. It would be the only time they would have dedicated to training their animagi forms until the Trial of Water, since Hermione was determined to bring Harry to the swimming pool during the winter holidays, as well. Their shapeshifting would be put on hold to make sure Harry was as comfortable in a watery environment as quickly as possible.

Picking up where they had left off weeks ago, they were both capable of shifting their limbs. Harry could turn his arm from the elbow down into a slightly misshapen wing with light feathering, which he used to fan Hermione playfully. The rest of his body, however, seemed to be very unwilling. Hermione seemed to be running into the same problem. Transforming her extremities wasn't much of a problem, but changing the rest of her body, and her size, was proving to be difficult. Every time they tried, they would suddenly suffer a strange panic attack and back out immediately. It seemed an entirely foreign body was going to be very hard to get used to, on an instinctive level.

When the train passed by Northampton, they knew they were getting close. Practicing their sneaking skills, they cast silencing charms on their shoes and their best disillusionment they could muster. They carefully followed the tracking spell to the next car until Harry's wand pointed into a cabin. Moving slowly so their disillusionment wasn't as noticeable, Harry peeked inside to make sure they were all there.

"Looks like they're still plotting our demise," Harry whispered.

"Alright then. If they couldn't figure out how to undo the private gate charm, then the prison lock will really trap them. Claucerus!"

"Silencio!" Harry added to the door. "What? I can't just let them call for help that easily." They stayed there for a few more minutes, but it was obvious Draco and his little gang weren't coming out any time soon. "You know, as much as I'd like to see Malfoy's face as he struggles to get out of his cabin, I'd rather not be late in meeting your parents. Let's go."

The rest of the train ride was entirely peaceful until they pulled to a stop at King's Cross. Crossing the barrier to the platform, Hermione squealed as she ran up to her parents, hugging them both. Harry stood with the trunks, watching the love and cheer in the Granger family, until Hermione and Emma walked over and pulled Harry into their little family reunion.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- yes, this chapter is a result of another one of my silly one-shot ideas, i.e. "how to incorporate Bishie Sparkle into Harry Potter." I thought the Weasley twins were the perfect vessel for that.

Chapter 20: Last-Minute Shopping

"Run that by me again?" Dan was staring at his wife.

"You heard me perfectly well the first time. Hermione wants to..." Emma began.

"That's the part that makes no sense. Hermione asked to go shopping in London? Not you?"

"Yes! She asked to pick out a dress."

"So she's not going there to buy more magical textbooks? Are you sure that's really our daughter that stepped off the train?"

"Hermione's still a girl, Dan. She can still get excited about going to a dance. Oh, she'll need shoes, perfume, and a haircut as well."

"All this for a school dance?" Dan shook his head in disbelief.

"It's not just a dance. It's a fancy ball. You know, if she was still in normal school, she would have gone to a school formal next year anyways."

"Well, at least I know who her date is. I'll have a nice man-to-man talk with him while you girls go shopping for a day."

"Actually, Harry's coming with us. He wants to help shop, and I think he needs some formal clothing himself."

"He hasn't got a suit?" Remembering the phone conversation he had with the Dursleys last summer, reminded himself, "Oh, right. Of course not."

"Hermione mentioned that wizards wear a dress-robe or something like that for these occasions, while the girls are closer in line with normal fashion. We might end up dropping by Diagon Alley again."

"Well, we might as well make it a family affair then. I'll come along," Dan resigned.

"Actually, I have a job for you to do." Emma gave her husband a slightly patronizing smile. "Don't make that face at me, you know as

well as I do that you'd be bored out of your mind if you came along anyway."

"And Harry won't?"

"As far as Hermione can tell, clothes shopping is probably an entirely new experience for him. He's had nothing but hand-me-downs from his overweight cousin. He never wore anything that fit until he bought his first wizard robes. This should be fun for him."

Dan sighed. "I know he's a good kid, but I wonder how much of this... new Hermione is because of him."

"I know what you mean, but I don't think it's because of Harry. She's known him for three years before they became a couple. Maybe this is just Hermione growing up."

"What scares me the most is the fact that we might not be there to see it. We see her last summer and she brings home a boy, and a few months later the first thing she buys is one of those full-length swimsuit racers wear, and then she's talking fancy dresses. Have you seen how much she dotes on Harry? She might as well have been talking wedding dresses instead of evening gowns."

Emma's eyes widened. "I'm not going to let my little girl get married before she's graduated and landed herself a solid, well-paying job. I don't want her growing up dependent on some man."

Dan knew he'd finally managed to push one of his wife's buttons. He never dared to tell her, but she did look incredibly sexy when she argued passionately about something. He wondered how much further he could take it with her. "You know, if she does marry Harry, she wouldn't have to work another day in her life," he said with a smirk.

"Don't you dare suggest that Hermione become some kind of gold-digger," she glared at him with flames burning behind her eyes. "Since when did your daughter's wealth become more important than her happiness?"

Dan backpedalled quickly. "That's not what I said! I'm just saying that the extra money that Harry's got certainly isn't a bad thing."

"It is if she ends up being stuck doing nothing with her life with nothing to do except be a housewife."

"Harry wouldn't do that to her. Heck, she wouldn't let Harry do that. Have you seen her drag Harry out of the house to the swimming pool for the early bird swim the last few mornings? I think she's the dominant one in that relationship." Dan couldn't believe he was suddenly defending Harry.

"Oh, from what I've read in Hermione's letters, Harry can get pretty fierce when he has to. And did she show you the earrings he bought for her? Apparently he just got them on a whim, no special occasion at all."

"It might have been special to Harry. I think he'll end up paying for Hermione's dress instead of us, if this is their first dance," Dan added.

"I'm not going to take advantage of the poor boy!"

"Rich boy, you mean," Dan laughed. "And I'm not saying you should, I'm saying Harry will probably do his damndest to try."

Despite being in the late morning on a Friday, the shops were still as hectic as ever, as there were only two days until Christmas. They went from shop to shop as Hermione tried on many different evening gowns. Harry noted that she only picked dresses with a fully covered back, which quickly limited the selection. Being outside of school, neither of them could re-cast the glamours to hide their runes. Hermione wouldn't dare wear a dress that would let her parents see the scars. Unfortunately, the trends in fashion seemed to be towards revealing more and more skin, especially along the woman's back.

Hermione had also brought along the earrings Harry bought her in Hogsmeade. Feeling that it would be a rather odd combination wearing such elegant jewellery alongside her jeans, turtleneck and beanie while walking down the street, she kept the earrings in her purse and put them on each time she tried a dress. The first few dresses that caught her attention didn't make it out of the dressing room, before she realized she couldn't expose her back. Several more didn't make the cut after she put on her earrings, realizing the colours would clash. Soon enough, they were walking through stores and back out without trying a single one.

"You seem to be really picky about your dresses, Hermione," Emma said to her daughter. "Do you already have an idea of what you want, or are you finding that dresses aren't appealing to you?"

"No, mum, I want a dress for sure. I'm just looking for something with a high neck, and a slim waist, maybe like a corset. Kind of like the old medieval dresses in the movies, you know? But not too poofy or frilly. A little more modern, a bit more flow to it. The less-is-more mantra that a lot of cocktail dresses seem to take, but a lot of these take away a bit too much, and I think wizarding society is still pretty far behind muggles in terms of fashion. I think Professor McGonagall is biting her lip every time she sees one of us girls expose our knees! Oh, and I absolutely adore these earrings Harry got for me," she said, smiling sweetly as Harry tried to make sense of what Hermione was describing. "So I want the dress to be a deep blue, maybe as far as indigo, to match."

Emma nodded. "Well, you've certainly given this a lot of thought."

"I know, but I'm beginning to think that we might not be able to find one. Am I being too fussy? Maybe I should just settle on something less..."

"NO!" Emma and Harry both shouted at the same time, causing all three of them to look at each other in curiosity.

"You first," Emma said to Harry.

"I just... want this to be absolutely perfect for you, Hermione. I don't want you to have to settle for anything. Maybe we can find a seamstress who can make a custom dress for you?" Harry asked hopefully.

Emma shook her head. "No, not at this time of year. They're probably all busy filling out orders for Christmas, and then the shops will be closed on both Christmas and Boxing day, so at best, they'll start on the 27th. You have to head back to school on the 29th. I doubt they could finish it in time, especially since many of them might still have a backlog of orders for alterations to get ready for New Year's. A pre-made one in a shop is our best bet."

Hermione sighed. "Well, we still have a few hours left. Let's keep looking."

The rest of Hermione's scheduled shopping time wasn't a complete waste, as they did manage to find her a pair shoes for the evening. They were a silvery-coloured, strappy sandal with a relatively low, 3 cm heel. Hermione had chosen them because she was unused to wearing heeled shoes at all, but still managed to pick something elegant for the occasion. She went on to buy another two pairs, both slightly different shades of blue with the same heel height but with different strap patterns, just in case they didn't match the dress she eventually hoped to find. It was nearing three o'clock, when they were just about to move on to Diagon Alley to find Harry's dress robes when Hermione stopped in front of a shop.

"What is it? Have you found it?" Harry asked.

Hermione sighed. "No, not exactly. This is... almost what I had in mind," she said, pointing to one of the dresses on a mannequin. It was a two-piece dress, with a soft, curvy corset up top that laced up at the back and a smooth, slim skirt that flared out below the knees. The second part was a long-sleeved shrug that matched the dress, hugging the arms but widening at the elbows. It would cover her back perfectly and ended at the top with a choker collar. In front, it narrowed sharply to the neck which worked with the dress to expose a diamond-shaped keyhole, perfect for displaying a necklace. The only problem with it was that it was a deep burgundy instead of anything remotely blue.

"Why don't you try it on anyways? It's just the colour that's off, isn't it? Maybe they'll have another one inside," Harry suggested. They walked inside the store and asked to try it on. Hermione didn't come out of the dressing room, but asked for her mother to step inside with her. Harry could hear them chattering to each other.

"Well, it would be absolutely beautiful if it were about two sizes smaller. Can't you tighten up it up a bit?"

"That's as tight as it gets, Mum."

"I'm sure a few small alterations would be all it would take to fit..."

"Well, the colour's off anyways. This would be absolutely wonderful in blue."

"Are you sure it has to be blue? This does look wonderful..."

"Harry bought me these earrings remember? And sapphire's my birthstone. He really put a lot of thought into these."

"Well, we might be able to find another one like it."

"We've been up, down, and all over London today. It'll take a miracle to find something like this again."

Emma stepped back out while Hermione took off the dress. She and Harry found the store manager. Emma asked, "Do you have that same dress she's trying on in a smaller size and in blue or indigo?"

The lady shook her head. "I'm sorry, that's all we have at the moment. I could put in an order for you, but it won't arrive until the first week of January. We do have a few other dresses over here..."

Harry could tell from a quick glance that none of them were what Hermione was looking for. All three of them glumly left the shop. "Well, we can always go shopping for another two days before you have to go back to school. We'll be able to find something then," Emma suggested hopefully.

Hermione was in a dour mood until they arrived at the Leaky Cauldron and stepped through the enchanted wall into Diagon Alley. After a quick stop at Gringotts, they went directly to Madam Malkin's. Inside, it was even busier than Flouish and Blott's at the end of summer. The shop was filled with boys who needed dress robes, and thankfully there were a dozen new hires working frantically to have all of them fitted properly. Dress robes appeared to be a blend of muggle tuxedo and their regular robes, to Harry's surprise. Apparently wizarding fashion wasn't too far behind muggles- but then again, muggle men's fashion didn't change as dramatically or as quickly as the women's.

Once Harry was changed, Hermione gave him a little wolf whistle. "You look so much more handsome in a suit, Harry. We're going to have to buy you a bunch of muggle suits and blazers next summer. I like this."

With a smile, Harry headed to the counter. The witch asked, "Will that be all? All our dress robes come with the basic Fabulous-Fit charm, but you can add the Stain-Stopper, Lintless, and a basic Self-Repair charm for only three Sickles."

"Oh, I'd like that," Harry said. An idea came to him at that moment. "Suppose I brought some muggle clothes here, could you charm them for me? I'll need all the charms on my dress robe and a permanent colour change as well."

"Sorry, for now we're only doing alterations on our own clothes. With Christmas along with the ball at Hogwarts, we're far too busy as it is. I'd suggest heading over to Unifer's Alley. Mrs. Malkin's sister owns a shop there, only it's called Mistress Malkin's. She shouldn't be nearly as busy as us right now."

Harry thanked her and paid for his new robes. He debated with himself whether or not he should tell Hermione, but settled on surprising her. It would make a perfect Christmas gift. As he walked out of the store with the two Granger women, he asked, "Hermione, Mrs. Granger, do you have any plans for tomorrow? I was thinking of going out by myself for a little bit to buy Hermione's Christmas present."

Emma frowned. "I don't want a fourteen-year-old boy out on the streets shopping by himself, especially on one of the most hectic shopping days of the year. Pickpockets and muggers will be just as busy as the shoppers, you know. I'm guessing you want it to be a surprise for Hermione," she glanced at her daughter, who smiled understandingly. "But you should go with Dan. Make sure you're back early, because we have quite a dinner to prepare."

Harry nodded vigorously. "Thanks, Mrs. Granger. Maybe I can get Dobby to help you with dinner."

"Who's Dobby?" Emma looked surprised.

"He's a house-elf that bonded to me when I freed him from the Malfoys," Harry explained. "He loves doing housework, actually."

"Harry! You shouldn't take advantage of him like that! You should free him instead of enslaving him to you..." Hermione scolded, but

quickly stopped. "Wait, I think I've had this argument with you before..."

"Yeah, me too," Harry said. "Maybe Dobby can explain it? Dobby!" Harry called out for his house-elf.

"I is here, Master Harry!" Dobby proudly appeared in front of them. Emma jumped back in surprise and stared at the wee little creature standing before them.

"Dobby, I want you to help the Grangers prepare their Christmas Eve dinner tomorrow." Dobby's eyes lit up with excitement. "But first, can you explain why you bonded to me?"

"I is being bonded to Master Harry because Master Harry is noble and proud! Master Harry is a good master!" Dobby hopped up and down gleefully.

"No, Dobby... what I meant was, when you were freed from the Malfoys, why didn't you just... stay free? Why did you bond yourself to anybody at all?" Harry asked him.

Dobby's eyes watered. "Is Master Harry wanting to free Dobby? I has been bad house-elf! I am working for Hogwarts when I should be working for Master Harry!" He threw himself to the ground and began thumping his head on the brick walkway. Emma stared in disbelief at Dobby's behaviour, still completely dumbstruck.

"No! Dobby, stop! I command you to stop hurting yourself!" Harry quickly picked the elf up and set him on his feet. "I'm just curious why you'd want to be free from the Malfoys but why you wouldn't want to... stay free."

"But if I is free, then I cannot work!" Dobby said. Harry and Hermione stared at him for a moment, thinking there would be more to his answer.

"Wait, so... you like working?" Dobby nodded.

"But... what if you could be free and just do whatever you like, for yourself?" Hermione asked.

Dobby looked horrified. "I would die without Master Harry! House-elves cannot work for themselves! It would be like tickling by yourself... or holding your hand with your hand... no, clapping to yourself..." Dobby's face scrunched up in confusion as he attempted to explain it.

Hermione seemed to understand. "So you mean when you work for someone else, it's like... when Harry and I hold each other's hands? That's how you feel?"

Dobby bounced up and down at the analogy. "Yes, yes, or like when Master Harry and Her-minion press faces each day!"

Hermione went red as she avoided her mother's gaze, while Harry covered his eyes with his hand. They were still careful never to kiss in front of their parents, rather embarrassed about explaining how deep their relationship had become in a few short months, but here was ten pounds of tiny magical elf proclaiming they had done so on a regular basis. "Thank you Dobby, that's all for now. You can come back tomorrow when it's time to cook dinner..."

When Dobby disappeared again, Emma turned to her daughter and said, "You seem to have left out a lot of information in your letters home." Turning to Harry, she said, "And you should just be glad I sent Dan on some errands instead of going shopping with us today."

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?" Dan asked.

"No, this should be fine." Harry stood at the side of the road and held his wand up. With a sudden bang, a huge, purple, triple-decker bus appeared in front of them. Dan stumbled backwards, almost as if the Knight Bus had crashed into place. Harry stepped on and it took a few seconds for Dan to come to his senses and follow him.

Harry paid the fare for both of them to Diagon Alley, where he exchanged some Galleons for pounds. Dan's eyes boggled once again at the amount of cash Harry was about to put into his pocket. "Uh, Harry, I know I've said this before, but perhaps you shouldn't carry so much cash with you. Diagon Alley seems like a fairly nice place, but if we're walking into London then you might lose that before you get a chance to spend it..."

The goblin overheard Dan, and said to Harry, "We take the security of our money very seriously, Mr. Potter. May I interest you in a blood-sealed mokeskin, guaranteed against theft by Gringotts?"

"Uh, could you explain what that is?" asked Harry.

The goblin already had its hands under the desk, ready to grab a few contracts and a blood needle as soon as Harry said the right words. "A mokeskin pouch is a good method of storage to prevent theft. The pouch itself can shrink until it becomes invisible to everyone except the owner. Our pouches, however, are further protected with a blood seal that can only be opened by the owner."

"That sounds very useful. How much is it?"

The goblin quickly whipped out a parchment, quill, and the blood needle, placing them on the desk. "Nine galleons flat for the pouch and the blood seal." Harry could easily afford that, so he picked up the quill. The goblin stopped him just before the tip touched the parchment. "Could I also offer you some additional features for your pouch, Mr. Potter?"

"Uh, what kind of features?"

"For an additional fee of eleven sickles, we can give it the Constantly Correct Change Compartment, which will automatically withdraw from your account exactly the right amount of change you require for every transaction. There is an additional transaction fee of only two Knuts for each purchase you make this way."

Harry hesitated for a moment, but decided it would be extremely helpful, not to mention convenient, not to have to visit Gringotts every single time he needed to make a purchase, nor ever accidentally be short on cash. He would have to restrict that feature for large purchases, as an extra two Knuts on every little purchase would add up quickly. "Will I be able to keep some coins on hand instead of making a separate withdrawal each time?" he asked, to be sure.

The goblin's smile faltered slightly as he explained, "Yes, the compartment is accessed by a separate flap on the outside of the pouch. When you have finalized your purchase at any store, simply open the flap and empty its contents, which will always be exactly

the right amount you need. The interior of the bag will hold the coins you have placed in there yourself."

When Harry nodded in acceptance, the parchment suddenly lengthened and a new paragraph appeared detailing the new feature. He was just about to sign it again when the goblin stopped him.

"Do you also foresee yourself making purchases in British Pounds soon?"

Harry nodded.

"The Currency Exchange Enchantment is available for both the main compartment of the pouch and the Constantly Correct Change Compartment for only six sickles, which will allow you to pull out money in the currency that is accepted at the store. Of course, there is a small transaction fee of only two percent per purchase."

"I can guess it's automatic for the change compartment, but how do I convert the money inside the main compartment?" Harry asked. I don't want to do it by accident, he thought.

"Simply hold the coins in your hand, while keeping it inside the pouch, and say the name of the currency you wish to convert them to. They will immediately change in your hand," the goblin explained.

Harry took a deep breath. It certainly was useful, and he was muggle-raised after all. Hermione was muggle-born, so he would be expecting quite a bit of muggle shopping with her in the future. "That seems useful..." he said, and the contract once again lengthened and another paragraph appeared. Moving his hand down to the signature line, the goblin spoke up once more.

"The withdrawal limit for both the Currency Exchange Enchantment and the Correct Change Compartment is currently set at one hundred galleons. We could raise it as high as five hundred galleons, for a small fee..."

Dan stepped in at this point. "Harry, you don't need that. The current features should be fine, he'll take it as it is, won't you, Harry?"

Harry agreed. "That should be all I need for the pouch." He finally signed his name on the parchment, and allowed the goblin to prick

the needle on Harry's finger until it turned red. The goblin gave a menacing snarl at Dan as he hurried away. A few minutes later, he returned with a pouch that he held with metal tweezers.

"Take the pouch, Mr. Potter. After you touch it, nobody will be able to see it again except you." Harry picked it up, putting the strap around his neck and letting it hang inside his shirt. He emptied his usual money-pouch into the new makeskin one.

Dan shook his head as they left the back. "Vicious, those goblins. I heard they were nasty bankers, but I didn't expect them to be such pushy salesmen as well. Where to next?"

"Um, it was walking distance from the Leaky Cauldron, if I remember correctly. I can't recall the name of the store, but I can find my way there."

"It's not a jewellery store, is it?" Dan asked.

"No, why?"

"Well, we were thinking Hermione needed a necklace to complete her outfit. You already got her earrings that she's determined to wear, so I'll be buying her a necklace today. You had better not be getting one for her, too..."

"No, I'm getting her dress for her," Harry answered.

"I thought you couldn't find one yesterday?" Dan was perplexed.

"I figured a way around that," Harry answered. They walked together for about fifteen minutes before Harry found himself outside the same shop window he was at yesterday. Walking up to the manager, he asked her for the same dress, which was back on display in the front window.

Recognizing Harry, she asked, "Weren't you here yesterday? I thought the dress didn't fit your sister properly?"

Harry laughed. Well, it certainly wasn't usual for a young boy to be dress shopping with his girlfriend's mother. He didn't bother trying to correct her. "Um, I just found someone else who could do alterations quickly. I'd like to buy it now, please."

"Well, that's good news then. I've had so much trouble selling that dress. People come to look at it so often, but nobody's ended up buying it yet." She rang up the dress, neatly folding it and placing it in a large box. Harry paid for it with the money he had withdrawn before, and quickly made their way out.

"So that's it?" Dan asked, waiting for him outside.

"No, we've another stop to make. We have to head back to Diagon Alley." Another fifteen minute walk and they were back in the Leaky Cauldron. Borrowing some Floo powder from Tom, Harry explained to Dan how the Floo worked.

"Mistress Malkin's!" Harry said clearly, throwing the powder into the fireplace. As he stepped through, he tumbled out the other end. He was immensely relieved that he hadn't accidentally crushed Hermione's dress in his fall. Dan stepped out of the fireplace after him, almost tripping over Harry as he arrived.

"Why are you on the floor? Didn't you take a tumble like this last time? Am I really supposed to believe that you're the star athlete at your school?" Dan's eyes narrowed.

"I am! The fireplaces just hate me, that's all." Harry stood up, dusting himself off. They found themselves in a small shop with very unusual clothing- it was almost as if he was in the dressing room for a circus. There were feathery costumes, scaly vests, multicoloured robes not unlike the kind Dumbledore liked to wear, some pyjama-like set that was so thin it could only fit a skeleton, and other bizarre-looking things scattered about.

"Why hello, there. What can I do for you?" came a voice from behind the counter. The woman was shorter than Madam Malkin, but had a confident air about her that made her seem much larger than she really was. She was busy sewing something- or, at least, directing half a dozen needles and thread to move themselves across some fabric. Harry was amazed at how much she could concentrate on at once.

"We were told to come here to have some clothes enchanted. I'll need a permanent colouring change on this dress, to a midnight

blue. I'll also need the Fabulous Fit, Stain-Stopper, Lintless, and Self-Repair charms on it."

The woman looked at the dress in Harry's hands for a few moments muttering something to herself. "I haven't seen a dress like this in my lifetime. Is that all you want? I can have it done in an hour," Ms. Malkin said. "It'll cost you eight Sickles."

"What other charms can you do?" Harry asked.

"Well, I can put in a slimming charm so the lady will look a few sizes smaller than she actually is..." Harry shook his head. Hermione was plenty beautiful already, and she certainly kept herself in good health after reading all about proper nutrition, diet, and exercise.

"Hm? No? Well, I'd suggest a comfort charm. It'll feel smooth as silk whenever she puts it on, no matter what it's made of. It'll even feel the perfect temperature, even if the room's too hot or cold. That has its limits, though," she explained. "The Envy charm is one of my specialties. Every other dress in the room will seem to be shabby in comparison if you've got this charm on. It doesn't work very well if two dresses both have it. I can also do a Gliding Gown charm. The dress will never drag along the ground, or even up a flight of stairs. She'll never have her foot caught on the hem."

"Uh, I think I'll go for the comfort charm and the Gliding Gown. She can do without the others," Harry said, imagining how Hermione would look on the day of the ball.

"Oh, you've got a beautiful one, don't you? Well, with those two it'll cost you twelve Sickles, and it'll take an extra fifteen minutes." Harry paid and took a note of the time. He and Dan stepped out of the shop and into Unifer's Alley.

Mistress Malkin's, apparently, wasn't the only shop with unusual wares. Every store in this shopping alley seemed to have rare and unique offerings. There was one shop that offered to embellish and personalize wands- etching the owner's name or slightly changing the shape of the grip for better comfort, or even studding jewels in. Harry was perfectly fine with his own wand- he didn't want to dress it up for show. There was another shop that did magical tattoos- and apparently wizardfolk frowned upon tattoos even more than muggles. Harry walked by the shop quickly, as Dan would have given him a

harsh glare if he had even looked at the shop any longer. They walked into a shop that seemed to be selling camping equipment, which interested Dan greatly. Unfortunately, wizards' ideas of camping differed greatly from muggles. They seemed to have everything to ignore the outdoors as much as possible, including detailed maps so that wizards could apparate precisely into the campsites without hiking, and tents that were far more luxurious than the one the Weasleys had taken to the World Cup, and animal-repellents that kept all wildlife as far from the campers as possible.

"I could make use of some of these things," said Dan, "But all this stuff together? It makes me wonder why wizards even bother with the concept of camping."

Further down the street, Harry walked into what he thought was a flower shop, at first. He quickly noticed that there were no bouquets—only live plants. As he walked by one pot that had a shrivelled-up, weedy thing that appeared to be dead, it seemed to fill with colour as he got nearer, then shrunk back as he passed. Curious, he returned to it, to find it perk up again. As he reached his hands towards it, a small bud at the end began to open up, revealing some shiny, chrome-like petals. The flower suddenly became tinted with orange right before Harry felt a hand slap down on his shoulder.

"Best not be touchin' that one, it'll suck the magic right outta ya through yer finger." Harry was startled to see a man, presumably the shopkeeper, right behind him.

"Really? It can do that?" Harry quickly put his hand back in his pocket.

"Naw, I'm just foolin' witcha. It does feed off yer magic though, but you'd need a hundred of these 'fore ye'd feel even a smidgen flappy."

"Um... alright..." Harry backed away slowly.

"What can I get fer ya? Would you mind takin' me aciesan off me hands? I ain't got any more blood to feed it since I sold me serpentvine. Can't be killin' chickens for no reason now can I? Din' even mean to sprout it, but once the seed touches a drop o' blood, there's no stopping it, is there? Eh?" He smiled and stared at Harry, expecting an answer.

"Uh... no, I guess not..." Harry said. "But I don't think I'll be needing that plant... I was just here to look at flowers."

"Most people don' come into this here shop to look for flowers, laddie. I got naught but the deadliest plants in all of Britain!" He gave a poorly-contrived evil laugh.

"Didn't you just tell me that first flower I was looking at couldn't hurt me?" Harry asked.

"Aye, I guess that one ain't so deadly. It could kill itself a magical fly, maybe."

"What about normal flies?"

"What about 'em?"

"What if a... never mind. Do you have any flowers? Other than that..." Harry waved in the flower's general direction, which had gone back to its half-dead, wilted state again.

"Affiniter? I do have some pixiehats, I guess..."

"What are those?"

"They're good for attractin' pixies. They like wearin' 'em as hats." Harry shook his head, remembering the class in second year when Lockhart had released a cage of Cornish pixies. He didn't want to attract them to him.

"Have you got any flowers that are a deep blue?" Dan asked. "Hermione will need a corsage," he explained to Harry.

"That's it? Ya just want somefin' blue?" The shopkeeper goggled at him. "Nuffin' ta smite yer foes and eat their toes? Hey, I rhymed!"

"Uh, no. Just a flower... like that one!" Dan noticed a flower at the back of the store, hidden behind a few larger, bushier plants.

"Oh, the Flumpet Cupflower? Some crazy chap sold it to me ages ago. It ain't done nuffin' worth the dirt it's sittin' in. Told me it keeps nargles away. Took a year ta figure it out, if I ain't never seen a

nargle before, how do I know they're stayin' away now any more than they were before, huh? I'll sell it to you fer the price of the pot and the dirt, you can have the flower fer free."

Thanking the storeowner, they left the shop with Dan holding the plant. They spent some time browsing other shops, such as one that sold magical armour, and another that had antique tools, like magical staves (which fell to disuse several hundred years ago, after wands were invented). Harry and Dan were both surprised to find one shop that dealt with "Muggle Imports," which helped wizards buy muggle goods- with hefty "locator" fees, of course. There was a shop for exotic pets, none of which Harry had seen before, but at least none of them were exotic enough to be interesting to Hagrid. All of the shops seemed to have unusual things they would have a hard time finding in Diagon Alley, but not as shady as in Knockturn Alley. They continued to check out the odd wares until they found themselves walking towards Mistress Malkin's shop again, only from the other side.

"Did we walk in a circle?" Harry asked Dan.

"No... we've been going straight down the street," Dan answered, perplexed. He looked ahead, and the street did appear to be perfectly straight, stretching into the distance. He looked behind, and it was the same.

"Wait here for a second," Harry said, as he ran ahead. Two minutes later Dan heard Harry shout from behind him. "I think this street loops around somehow," he concluded.

"Then how do we get out of here?"

"Uh, let's just ask Ms. Malkin." They stepped into the shop, where the seamstress was waiting with the dress, neatly packed into the box. The colour would match Hermione's earrings perfectly.

"It's ready, dear. I had ever so much fun with this dress, it reminds me of one of my favourite witches..."

"Thanks," said Harry. "Um, could you tell us how to get out of Unifer's Alley? We didn't see any kind of exit..."

"Are you trying to walk out of here?" Ms. Malkin laughed. "You've got to floo or apparate out of this Alley! We don't have any muggles accidentally wandering in here, like they do sometimes at Diagon."

Dan looked thoroughly unamused while Harry said, "Well, I guess it's Floo again. Time to go back to the Leaky Cauldron."

The men arrived home just before the women did. Harry hastily began wrapping up the present when he saw Emma's car pull into the driveway. He stopped midway when he saw Hermione step inside. She had cut her hair so that it was now shoulder-length, instead of reaching all the way down her back. Not only that, the hairdresser had apparently given her a perm and conditioner as well, so it lay straight and shiny, as opposed to the dull, bushy mass that she had before. It looked very much like when she climbed out of the pool after her swimming lessons with Harry, which he loved.

"Hermione! I almost didn't recognize you!"

"Do you like it, Harry?" Hermione was shyly biting her lip again. The look, combined with the new haircut, was driving Harry mad. He had to constantly remind himself that both parents were watching as he restricted himself to "just" a hug.

"I love it! Nobody will know what hit them when you step into the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Oh, I got you your present! I'm wrapping it now."

"I got you yours, too. Are you going to tell me what you got me?"

"Of course not! You'll find out tomorrow morning."

Dobby somehow knew to arrive right when they were about to prepare dinner. The Grangers were amazed at how quickly and efficiently Dobby worked. Emma tried to keep up, but eventually ended up sitting back and watching the little elf work his magic around the kitchen. He ended up cooking a delicious feast that the Grangers didn't even know was possible, given what they had (or thought they had) in the refrigerator. As he prepared more and more dishes, he was flying around, and it actually became dangerous for the humans to go anywhere near the kitchen as knives and pots went flying back and forth through the air.

After stuffing themselves with the best (technically) home-cooked meal they had ever eaten, they all settled down in the living room to watch some Christmas films together, including Dobby. The little elf kept fidgeting as he couldn't figure out something to do. Emma suggested that he make some hot cocoa, and he disappeared immediately at the chance to do some work. The evening eventually ended with Harry and Hermione cuddled in each other's arms, sipping the last of their cocoa together.

"You know that was the first Christmas dinner I've ever had? Except at Hogwarts, of course. I mean a nice family dinner... even if they're not family, your parents are so accommodating."

"I've been sneaking in a good word for you in my letters home," Hermione said with a wink. "I really hope that, one day, they really will see you as family. For now, they're just happy that I've made such a wonderful friend."

"You know you're more than that to me, Hermione." Harry stroked Hermione's new hairdo. He still wasn't quite used to it yet.

"Hopefully, I'll have convinced them enough by the end of the year to take you in for another summer. Maybe you'll never have to see the Dursleys again!"

"You really think they would?" Harry asked, his voice filled with hope. A Dursley-free life would be a better Christmas gift than anything that could be bought in a store.

"I'm sure they will. They were actually pretty happy to have you around last summer already, but they were worried about us getting too close."

"I'm not sure if I want to give... this up just to keep pretending for another summer," Harry said as he squeezed Hermione tighter.

"No, I'd suggest just the opposite. Maybe they'd welcome you more if you showed how much you really love me. It might still mean less kisses and cuddles, so they know it's not just some silly teen romance."

"I guess you're right. I don't know what I'd have to do, though, unless it means jumping in front of lorries every time you cross the street..."

They both laughed as they tried to plan out the rest of their year, until they fell asleep together on the couch in front of the Christmas tree. Harry dreamed of the Grangers adopting him from the Dursleys, while Hermione dreamed of her white knight, stopping buses with his bare hands for her...

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- The inspiration for the dress came from Cho's dress in the movie, actually. I think it was the nicest one there. Obviously, Hermione's isn't going to be Chinese-y.

- I'm actually just as surprised as you probably are that I still haven't managed to get to the Yule Ball yet. I even had a couple more ideas for this chapter but decided to cut it shorter.

Chapter 21: The End of the Holidays

Hermione gingerly unwrapped her present. Had it been more carefully wrapped, she could have undone the tape far more easily with her practised method of preserving the wrapping paper. Unfortunatelly, Harry had taped it all together hastily yesterday when he saw the car approach, resulting in a gift with far too much tape and extra folds where they shouldn't be. Harry watched her eagerly, while Emma was trying to get clues from her husband, who wasn't giving an inch.

Riiiiippippp came the sound of tearing paper as Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. "Will you finally just open it up, Hermione?" Harry goaded her on.

"Fine," she sighed as she quickly ripped off the paper, revealing a nondescript box inside. As she opened it up, she stared at the contents, speechless for a few seconds, before shutting it again quickly. "Harry! How is this possible? They said they couldn't get another one until..."

"Magic," Harry replied, grinning from ear to ear.

"Harry, tell me! Did they have this one at a different branch? You didn't pay a huge sum of money to get a whole new one made quickly, did you? How did... oh wait, you meant magic magic, didn't you?"

"Hermione, for being the smartest witch ever, I have to wonder how you forget that you are a witch sometimes."

"I usually put my mind off magic while I'm at home, since I can't cast spells anyways. I normally read muggle novels and textbooks while I'm back..." Hermione explained sourly. Her mood didn't last though, as she opened the box once again and held the dress in front of her. "Mum, dad, I'm sorry, but I really want to try this dress on right now. I'll open your gift later!" She ran up to her room, slamming the door behind her.

"Harry, I think this is a good time for you to go to your room and put your dress robes on," Emma said as she nudged him. As Harry left, she said to her husband, "Get the camera."

Only five minutes later, Hermione was already changed and quickly walking down the stairs while quickly combing and tying her hair back into a simple, but elegant, bun that the hairstylist had shown her. "Don't rush, dear, you'll trip!" Emma warned.

"Actually, she probably won't, with that dress. One of the things Harry ordered was some kind of charm that made it easier to walk with it on," Dan explained.

"It fits like a dream, mum! It's so much more comfortable than when I tried it on at the shop! It goes so well with the earrings. Where's Harry?"

"I'm coming!" Harry was slowly walking down the stairs, his eyes and hands on his collar. "How do you tie this thing, anyways?" he asked as he struggled with his bow tie. He looked towards Dan for help, who just shrugged in reply. Emma walked over to him.

"I'm the one who always ties his ties for him," she said. "Honestly! You'd think after almost two decades of marriage he'd learn to do it himself!"

"I'm nothing without you, honey!" Dan tried to appease his wife while he presented Hermione her present. "I think this would be a good time to open our gift to you," he said.

Hermione opened up the small box and hugged her father in delight. "This is perfect!" she cried as she took a necklace out of the box and immediately worked to put it on. Like the earrings, the chain was relatively thin and made of silver. It split into a double chain at the front and each of the two chains each with a sapphire dangling at the middle. There was another set of sapphires at the points where the chains met. It was displayed perfectly in the keyhole opening on Hermione's dress.

"How on earth did you pick that necklace?" Emma asked. "You didn't get to see that dress until yesterday with Harry, right?"

"Lucky guess?" Dan shrugged. He held up the camera. "Let's get some pictures!"

They spent the next hour running around the house, looking for good places to pose. After a few shots in front of the Christmas tree, and another on the couch, a few sitting on the stairs, they started on more staged shots. Dobby quickly whipped up a mock dinner as they sat on opposite ends of the table, there was another with Harry kneeling on the ground as if he was proposing, followed by one where he was holding Hermione in his arms. They even braved the cold outside for a few quick shots of them playing in the snow. Thankfully, the stain-resistant charms did their jobs well, preventing any snow or dirt from tarnishing their new evening wear. By the end of it, they had gone through three rolls of film and were all back in the living room, having a good laugh. Emma had tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Mum? What's the matter?" Hermione asked.

"You have no idea how happy this has been for me... I never thought I'd get the chance to see you like this!"

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother... well, she pretty much imagined your whole life before you were even born," Dan explained. "She would read you books every night before you'd go to bed, and then she would tuck you in and kiss you goodnight. She would take you to swimming lessons, and then piano lessons, and then you'd spend weekends playing together at the park... heck, she practically imagined your whole life up to the point where you got married."

Emma's cheeks were already red from the combination of laughing and crying, but it was obvious now that she was blushing. "Dan! You weren't supposed to tell her!"

"It's just a fun family story! We'll all look back on this one day and laugh." Dan continued, "Well, despite a few setbacks, like how much you hated ballet, you pretty much had the childhood Emma dreamed of giving you. Until we all found out about Hogwarts, that is."

"You can't possibly mean..." Harry started, quick to defend his girlfriend, even from her parents. Hermione was speechless.

"No! We're proud that Hermione has magical talent, and we fully support her. It's just... the little things that we're missing out on," Emma said.

"Your mum wanted to, you know, help you with homework after school, watch you beat out all the others in the maths contests, win first prize at the science fair..."

"...and getting you a dress and meeting your date for your school formal," Emma finished. "I never heard about a school formal for Hogwarts, so I'm guessing this one is special? It's only because there's that tournament this year, right?"

"And Harry," Hermione said, linking her elbow with Harry's. "In fact, I'm guessing the only reason they made it open to fourth-years is because Harry's a fourth-year, otherwise they probably would have kept it for sixth and seventh-years only. That's how it's been traditionally."

"Then I have to thank you again, for making me and my daughter happy," Emma told Harry as she gave him a hug. Harry hugged her back. Between the dinner yesterday and the presents today, it was the best Christmas he could have ever hoped for.

Several hundred kilometres north inside a castle in Scotland, one red-haired boy was having one of the worst Christmases he could remember. He stared absent-mindedly at an unopened gift sitting at the base of the Gryffindor Christmas tree, already knowing what was inside. It was a hand-knit sweater from his mother... to Harry.

"I take it mum hasn't heard about your little fallout with Harry, has she?" Fred asked Ron.

"You're just lucky she stopped reading Skeeter's articles ever since that woman slandered her favourite author, Emmanuel Rickards," George said.

"And the only reason Ginny hasn't told is because she's hoping Harry might still want to stay over next summer if you two make up..."

"And a Howler from Mum wouldn't help things along those lines."

"So, our dear, littlest brother, what are you going to do about it?"

"Why are you defending him?" argued Ron. "He's the one who got his name into the cup while you two took the blame!"

"Ah, but you don't know the prankster's code," Fred said mysteriously. Ron gave him a blank look.

"After a prank goes wrong, it's every man for himself," George said.

"That's why Lee gets away with helping us so often."

"Not that we mind, we could always use the extra hand every now and then."

"But don't you two always end up in detention together?" Ron asked.

"Only because the teachers can never figure out which one of us is which."

"And they figure if one of us did it, the other had to know, at least."

"So you two aren't even mad that he's up in front of the crowds when it could have been you two?" Ron was completely bewildered by his brothers' attitudes, as he wanted to be the one standing on stage with the crowds cheering for him.

"Ron, get your head out of your arse," George said.

"We just wanted our names in the cup."

"Yeah, we're not stupid enough to try to go toe-to-toe with Krum in a duelling arena."

"We just like a good prank, and we can appreciate one that wasn't done by ourselves."

"Yeah, did you hear the Marauders managed to turn an entire classroom into a swamp? We've got a few ideas to try to one-up them."

"And you'd better stop eating Harry's mince pies."

Ron, who had absentmindedly opened one of the packages from his mother, also failed to look at who it was for. It smelled delicious, and Ron was certainly missing out on a box of chocolate frogs that Harry got him each year. He could do without a homework planner or alarm-calendar from Hermione, but he did miss having something sweet to munch on under the tree on Christmas day. He'd already cleared off half the pies that his mother had sent. As the twins left, he looked back at the box. It wouldn't do to give Harry an opened package with half the contents missing. He wouldn't miss what he didn't know about, would he? Ron shrugged, and picked up another. He was interrupted by Ginny, clearing her throat behind him.

"If you keep being such a slob, you'll never get yourself a date for the ball," Ginny said.

"Why would I want to go? It's just some stupid dance," Ron said, moving the pie towards his mouth again.

"Yeah, just some stupid dance where the stupid Minister of Magic, the stupid Viktor Krum, and the stupid all-star chaser of the English National Quidditch Team, Tavin Macalister, are all going to be there. Oh, and I heard from Percy he's going to be there as well, but he actually is a pompous git."

"What? Macalister's going to be there? What for?" Ron dropped the pie into his lap in shock. That was the star player on Ron's favourite team. In fact, he was quite possibly the only reason people still bothered betting on them, despite their ten-year losing streak. Unfortunately, one chaser's skill didn't make up for the rest of the team's lack of it, especially their seeker, who was quite possibly the weakest in the English league.

"He's going to try to convince Krum to sign on to Chudley Cannons next year. Don't you ever read the newspaper? Even the sports section?"

Ron just shook his head. "Why the Cannons? Krum plays for Bulgaria's national team, doesn't he?"

"His contract ended when he was picked for the tournament. The ball's been the first time people other than the press have been allowed into Hogwarts, so there'll probably be tons of recruiters trying to cozy up to Krum on New Year's Eve. Macalister's the only

one I know for sure." Ginny smiled, knowing the setup was complete. Ron would never give up a chance to meet his favourite player of all-time, in person.

"I... I've got to go to the ball, then!"

"You can't go without a date, Ron." Ginny giggled inside, but desperately tried to keep her face in an angry scowl.

"Date? I haven't even got dress robes! What'll I do?" Ron was panicking.

"Don't worry about the robes, I'll just tell mum to send you a set. Just worry about finding yourself a date," Ginny told him. "Oh, and this is just girls' gossip, but I think all the girls from fourth year and most of third year already have dates. You're pretty late to the game. Happy hunting!" She skipped away, leaving Ron to ponder the dilemma of trying to ask a second-year girl to the ball, or taking the once-in-a-lifetime-chance to actually meet his Quidditch hero.

Just outside Gryffindor tower and around the corner from the Fat Lady, Fred and George were waiting.

"How did it go?" George asked.

"Perfect. He soaked up every word I said," Ginny laughed.

"Attagirl, Ginny. He never would have believed us if we told him. Thank goodness you can act." Ginny beamed.

"Except when Harry's around, of course. You can certainly act like a mouse when he's in the room," Fred teased.

"Shut up! I'm getting better with that," Ginny defended herself. She had realized, of course, that she'd have to actually talk to Harry at some point, but the only thing they'd ever done together was nearly die in the Chamber of Secrets, which wasn't exactly common conversation material. Ron was a good excuse for her to get to know Harry, but ever since his jealous break-up with the trio, that had suddenly become a dead end. She did notice Harry talking to the twins far more this year, and getting into the twins' good graces might help her get closer to Harry.

"Have you written to great-uncle Ignatius already?" she asked the twins.

"And his reply. He'll be sending his old dress-robos over by tomorrow," George laughed.

"How ugly are those robes, anyways? You two keep talking about it, but I've never had a chance to see them..." Ginny pouted.

"You were too young to remember, but we were a good seven years old at the time."

"It was uncle Matthias's wedding, and great-uncle Ignatius showed up, wearing this... frilly..." George waved his hand, trying to come up with the right word.

"Rainbow. It was a frilly rainbow."

"We couldn't remember much of the rest of the wedding, because we couldn't take our eyes off that monstrosity."

"It was also why we cried a lot when Mum said we were going to visit him." Both the twins nodded solemnly, causing Ginny to break out in laughter.

Harry and Hermione waved their goodbyes at King's Cross as they crossed the barrier to platform 9¾. As soon as they passed through, however, they were accosted by Draco and his goons.

"I'll get you for what you did to me on the train, Potter! You'd better watch your back," he spat.

"Huh? What did I do?"

"Don't deny it! It's obvious it was you. I'll have your wand snapped for this!" Draco was fuming.

"No, seriously, what did I do to him?" Harry turned to Hermione to jog his memory. With such a fantastic holiday break, he had put life's little annoyances like Draco Malfoy out of his mind.

"We locked him in his cabin on the train," Hermione reminded him.

"Right!" Harry laughed. "Sorry, Malfoy, I forgot about that. You know you shouldn't try to break into someone else's cabin, don't you? That was just a quick lesson on manners. And unlocking charms. How did you finally get out?"

Draco refused to answer, as it would obviously be embarrassing. "I swear, you'll pay for what you did, Potter."

"But not right now, huh? Too scared to lose in a duel against me again, are you, Malfoy? Especially with all these people around here to witness your defeat. A Malfoy, beating a Potter? I've heard better stories from Luna," Harry said loudly, noticing a few people had taken notice of their confrontation- especially one person he really wanted to infuriate.

Draco, with his temper pushed far beyond the boiling point, shouted, "Potter, you'll be the last of your line, I'll make sure-" He was drawing his wand, but was quickly stopped with by a hand on his shoulder. Draco turned to see his father, who had a very unhappy look on his face.

"Draco, may I remind you that you are not the head of the Malfoy House, and you do not have the authority to declare a blood feud against the Potter House. I won't have you sully the family name." Harry snickered as Draco looked at his father in horror. He quickly pushed past, noticing Lucius was keeping his eye on him until he was on the train.

"Harry, you made yourself a really powerful enemy just now, do you realize that?" Hermione nearly shouted at him as she locked and warded the door behind them.

"He's always been my enemy, now he just knows that I know," Harry shrugged. "At the very least, he won't be able to touch me for the rest of the year. I'm pretty certain he's going to be one of Voldemort's top lieutenants or something once he makes his return..."

"Still, you shouldn't have made yourself a target for him. We don't want to stir up anything too early. Don't be in such a rush to reveal your hand, you know?"

"Actually, I was thinking the opposite. All we've got left from the trips we made with the first beacon are indistinct feelings and memories. I want to shake things up and see who's really on our side as quickly as possible so that, next time around, we'll know right away who are friends and enemies are."

"You mean like Ron? And Moody?"

Harry nodded. "Well, Ron's not a big deal, he's just being childish. Maybe we can get Moody out from the Imperius right away next time so I won't have to be in the tournament. Some other people I'm not too sure about. I'm getting a bad feeling about Lucius Malfoy, but I'm not sure if it's just because he's as big of a git as Draco is, or if he really is someone to watch out for in the upcoming war."

"You know he was a former Death Eater, right?"

"Yeah, but look at it this way- right now, he pretty much picked up all the pieces that Voldemort dropped. Does he really want to give up all that power and wealth he has now? As soon as he comes back, Voldy will probably just demand that he hand over some money. Heck, he might even fight against Voldemort, even if it's for purely selfish reasons."

They spent the remainder of the train ride discussing who might be potential allies or enemies. They felt they could trust all the teachers at Hogwarts, save Snape, and post-Imperius Moody. Their impression of French magical culture, based on the Beauxbatons delegation, at least, made them feel that France might help against Voldemort. Blood purity wasn't an issue, and even mixed blood like Fleur or Madame Maxime was perfectly acceptable. Durmstrang was an amalgam of students from Eastern Europe, and Karkaroff was a former Death Eater. They respected power- and Voldemort had power. Most of them were hard to predict. Karkaroff only repented because he feared Azkaban- would he turn back to Voldemort? Krum seemed very interested in becoming as powerful as possible, but he also had a strong sense of fair play, possibly from being a professional athlete. He did skirt the rules as much as he possibly could- would he see Voldemort as a challenge to his own power, or go to him to learn how to become more powerful?

Throughout the ride, they heard the door handle jiggle every so often. As they pulled into the station, Harry chuckled, "Well, since

their unlocking charms are still just limited to Alohamora, I guess it took a while for an adult to find them and let them out last time."

"You think they're waiting to ambush us?" Hermione asked.

"Without a doubt," Harry said. They couldn't see anyone outside the cabin through the charmed glass, but it didn't mean they weren't hiding in the next cabin, ready to jump out. "I say we go in the opposite direction just in case. They'd probably expect us to go left to exit the train, and want to hit us from behind. I'll take the front."

"Why you? I can hold a perfectly decent shield, you know."

"Yeah, but I want to try something I learned from Krum."

"He taught you something?" Hermione asked doubtfully.

"Fine, I didn't learn from him, I'm just copying him," Harry answered.

They both waited as long as they could for the other students to clear out of the train, and quickly moved towards the exit on the opposite side. Hermione held her shield up behind her as Harry kept his wand out. The door four cabins down burst open and Malfoy leapt out with his wand in hand and several others followed suit. "Expelliarmus!" the Slytherin shouted.

Disarming charm? Really? Harry thought to himself as he poured as much energy as he could into his own spell as he shouted, "Protego Progresso!" He still wasn't able to cast the shield spell Krum had used against him silently, being much more complex. It was certainly a powerful spell which, normally, would only be useful in a one-on-one duel, but against three people in a crowded corridor, it was just as good. The shield swept forward, pushing Draco and his two goons back and crushing them against the back of the train. Harry quickly released the spell, partly because he didn't want to crush Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle to death, but mostly because he was quickly feeling drained. "Wow, now that's quite a spell. How on earth did Krum managed to cast three of these in a row? With a Bone-Bludgeoner in between?"

Hermione peeked around Harry's shoulder at the crumpled heap of green robes. "Well, first off, I think Krum is more powerful than you

for sure, but I also think you put way too much power into your spell this time," she said.

Thinking it was best not to walk right past them in case they woke up, they turned around again and headed out the other exit of the train. Just as they were about to step off, Harry heard a muffled groan and turned to see Malfoy rolling Goyle away. "You think you've won, Potter?" he snarled as he pulled his wand out from underneath the chubby oaf and pointed it at Harry. "Tereburere!"

Whatever the spell was supposed to do, it certainly wasn't what Malfoy had intended. In his haste, he hadn't noticed his wand had a small crack and was slightly bent. Instead of flying straight out from the wand, it seemed to spiral out and dissipate mid-flight, while some of it seemed to "leak" out of the crack, causing the wand itself to smoke slightly. Furious, he cried out, "You'll pay for what you did to my wand, Potter! My..." He stopped himself short of saying his trademark line.

"You know, I somehow suspect your father won't like hearing about this. I'm pretty sure that, whatever he told you back at King's Cross, it wasn't to try to ambush Harry Potter and get your own wand broken," Harry laughed. "Maybe I'll write to your father and let him know." Draco looked horrified as he quickly stumbled out the rear exit of the train, while Harry and Hermione decided to take their time, strolling from Hogsmeade to the castle instead of taking the carriages.

Professor Snape was waiting for them when they arrived. Having spent the last two months skipping out on Potions and studying on his own, he wasn't glad to see the greasy professor in front of him once again. The stress-free learning environment, Hermione's advice, and vague memories of having brewed the potions before helped him get through nearly all of the fourth-year's coursework by the end of first term. He wondered how that would reflect on Snape's teaching skills. For now, however, Snape was going to address him as the head of Slytherin House, not as potions professor.

"Potter! You've crossed the line this time. I'll have you expelled for attacking three of my students and snapping a wand!" Snape shouted.

"Well, I can't say I didn't see this coming," Harry said nonchalantly.

"So you admit that you broke Mr. Malfoy's wand, then? You'll have to buy him a new one," Snape sneered.

"I'll take this one, Harry," Hermione said. "Actually, Professor Snape, both magical law and the Hogwarts rules agree that Harry was well within his rights to defend himself."

"I find it hard to believe that snapping someone's wand is an act of defense. Now you will hand over your wand immediately."

"No he won't," Hermione interrupted. "You haven't even heard Harry's side of the story, yet. You can't confiscate a student's wand without evidence of his guilt in a serious magical offense."

"I have all the evidence I need," Snape said as he moved towards Harry.

"Yeah, we all know that all the evidence you need is for Malfoy to whine about how he's not getting his way. I don't know why I'm bothering with you. I'm going to take this to Professor Dumbledore," Harry boldly said as he pushed past his former potions professor.

"Professor Dumbledore is at a Triwizard meeting. If you're looking for him to save you, he's not available."

"Fine, then, let's take this to professor McGonagall."

"As deputy Headmistress, she is also at the meeting. Face it, Potter, you're going to have to deal with me."

"Actually," Hermione piped up again, "For matters outside the classroom, another professor is allowed to arbitrate in disagreements between a professor and a student in matters involving detention over one week, house point deductions over fifty, and, of course, expulsion and wand confiscation as you mentioned before."

"Let's take this to Professor Moody," Harry said immediately. He could tell Snape was terrified of the ex-Auror. Hurrying towards the Defense professor's office, they left Snape chasing after them. While keeping up a quick-paced jog, he said to Hermione, "Have I told you how much I love you, lately?"

"I think the last time you said it was about five minutes before we got to the castle, Harry," Hermione giggled.

"That was brilliant back there. Thank you so much," Harry said.

"I've been wanting to do that for a while, Harry. You're so lucky you're in the tournament, getting to skip his class and all. He's been picking on me in your place, I think, but he's having a harder time of it because I always brew the potions correctly."

Harry laughed. "Why don't you drop the class too? At the pace we're going, we could be ready for OWLs by the end of this year. Being in Snape's class holds you back, you know."

"Yes, but it'll show up on my grades if I don't do the assignments. And I still need to take the exams."

"Still, I'd love to take the potions OWL a year early if it means I don't have to deal with Snape any more."

They arrived at Moody's office and knocked on the door. Snape caught up to them just as Moody opened the door. "Mr. Potter. What can I do for you?" he asked. His magical eye swivelled towards Snape. "Having some problems with Death Eaters, son?"

"I... have been acquitted..." Snape said stiffly. "This is a Hogwarts matter, Professor Moody," he stressed.

"Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater. Maybe if you're willing to chop off your own left arm I'd be more inclined to believe your story. Albus might forgive you, but not everyone's so kind. Now what are you doing with Mr. Potter here?"

"Professor, we need you to arbitrate a disagreement we're having with Professor Snape. He wants to confiscate Harry's wand and maybe expel him."

"He also refuses to listen to my side of the story," Harry added.

"And whose side is he trusting instead?"

"Malfoy's."

Moody let out a low, animalistic growl while staring at Snape with both eyes. It was only then that Harry noticed Moody had had his wand pointed at Snape the entire time. "So, Professor Snape, taking the side of your comrade's son, eh? Still associating with the old crowd, I see. Maybe I should haul you down to the DMLE right now for another night in front of the mirror?"

Harry didn't know what mirror Moody was talking about, but Snape gave a barely perceptible shudder as he replied, "May I remind you that I am not the one on trial here, Professor Moody, and you are no longer an auror."

"Right then, lad. Tell me what happened."

"Basically, during the train trip, Draco tried to break into our cabin several times. He obviously failed," Harry explained as gave a knowing smile to Moody, who taught many of those spells, straight out of the auror's handbook. "At the end of the trip, we guessed he would try to ambush us, which he did. And failed in that, as well."

"You seem to have conveniently left out the part where you snapped his wand," Snape spat, barely holding in his anger.

"Because I didn't. I just cast a shield charm and Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle fell down. I think it was Goyle who snapped Malfoy's wand, by falling on it. Or maybe Malfoy broke it himself when he pulled it out from under Goyle." Harry shrugged.

"You're saying a shield charm knocked them over? Preposterous." Snape glared hatefully at Harry.

"Never big on actually collecting evidence, are you, Severus? No wonder we were losing the last war, with such a shoddy spy working for us... if you really were on our side, that is. There's a very simple solution for this. Potter, give me your wand."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked cautiously. While he definitely trusted Moody more than Snape, he didn't want to let his wand out of his reach without a very good reason.

"Good to know you're learning, boy. I'm going to cast Priori Incantato, which will show the last few spells cast by your wand." Harry handed

over his wand, and the spell revealed the Pushing Shield spell, followed by a few locking spells he had used in the cabin.

"That's it? You only cast locking spells on your cabin?" Moody growled.

"Hermione cast the privacy and detection wards," Harry explained quickly, amused that Moody was taking a keener interest in Harry's DADA skills than dealing with Snape.

"Good. Well, Severus, it seems like Harry here did only cast a shield charm. Now I have to ask why Harry needed to cast it in the first place."

"Well, Malfoy opened up with a disarming charm, and I countered with the shield. After he fell over, he tried casting another spell with his broken wand, but it didn't come out right. What does Tereburere do?"

Moody glared at Snape with both the fury and delight of a predator capturing its prey. "So did you teach him that spell, or did his father? Your little pupil tries to murder someone with a dark spell and you try to get the victim expelled? We're going down to the dungeons, and good thing we do have on-duty aurors on the grounds thanks to the tournament, eh? Potter, you're free to go." Moody marched Snape away at wandpoint after he ushered the teens out the door.

They entered Gryffindor Tower to see everyone in the common room drop what they were doing and stare. Surprisingly, Ron was the first to break the silence. He walked up to Harry and handed over the Christmas gift from his mother. Looking down in shame, he said, "I'm sorry I've been a bit of a git to you two," he said quietly.

"Now there's an understatement," Hermione snorted.

"I... um... I couldn't think of a way to make it up to both of you, but since Harry might get expelled, I was thinking I could take you to the ball instead?" he asked Hermione.

Bad news travels fast in this castle, doesn't it? thought Harry. "I'm not getting expelled, Ron, but Draco might be. I'm taking Hermione to the ball," he said.

"But... but... I have to go with Hermione! We've known each other for years!" Ron protested.

"I've known her for as long as you have, Ron, and I do have the advantage of being her boyfriend."

"I know, but you could find a date with any girl you want in the whole school! There's... nobody else I can go with!" Ron's so-called "favour" for Hermione was quickly becoming a favour for himself.

"And out of the whole school, I'd pick Hermione," Harry said with finality, to end the argument.

"Excuse me, boys, but did it ever occur to you to ask for my opinion on all this?" Hermione glared at Ron, but elbowed Harry as well. "Even if Harry was expelled, I would rather not go to the ball at all than go without Harry. He found the perfect dress for me, I got him his dress shoes, and we took pictures together with my family."

"Is that why you got your hair cut?" Parvati shouted out.

"You got a haircut?" Ron asked, staring at Hermione.

"You didn't even notice? Ron, we've hung out together for years, and now that half of Hermione's hair is gone and you can't see the difference?"

"This is why I could never go to the ball with you, Ron. You never pay enough attention... to anything, really. Me, Harry, your homework, everything! Harry, on the other hand, remembered exactly what I wanted and bought my dress for me. He remembered the one dress I liked the best out of dozens that I tried on, and then had it to a dressmaker to make it even better."

"So that's it? You're going with Harry because he bought your dress for you? You know I'd never be able to afford stuff like Harry does, is that it?" Ron was practically glowing red in anger as he stormed off to his room.

Harry was left speechless, while Hermione just shook her head, saying, "Ugh. That's exactly what I was talking about. Why did he even want to go with me anyways? He had the entire holiday to ask a girl at Hogwarts!"

"Allow us to explain," Fred said, with the George and Ginny grinning behind him. "Although it might have been funnier if you agreed to go with him, but we didn't expect you accept, so we do have a backup plan."

"Our dear little Ronniekins has never had much experience with the fairer sex," George explained.

"Apart from Ginny, Mum, Aunt Muriel, and maybe Luna, Hermione's probably the only girl he's ever said more than five words to in his whole life," Fred continued.

"And with Luna, half those words were usually 'loony,' so she probably doesn't count."

"So, quite literally, you're the only one he could even think of asking to the ball."

"He might have even thought that you had feelings for him," Ginny offered meekly.

"What? How on earth did he get that idea? We argue all the time!" Hermione's mouth hung open in confusion.

"He probably thought you enjoyed it. I mean, you do get into some pretty heated arguments with Harry, too," Ginny explained.

"There's a world of difference between arguments and debates, you know. Harry actually listens to what I say even if he completely disagrees with me. I try to get an idea into Ron's thick skull, and he just insults me and calls me barmy until we can't stand to talk to each other any more."

"I'm not sure if he knows the difference," Fred said.

"Well, what would have happened if I did agree to go with him? And why does he want to go so badly anyways? There's no way Ron's interested in fine dining and dancing."

"Well, we have to thank Ginny for the idea."

"She's the one who decided Ron needed to be taught a lesson, and writing to mum simply wouldn't do the job properly."

"So we decided to take it upon ourselves to teach our brother a lesson."

"We were just going to slip some of our test products into his food for a few days, nothing special, really."

"But Ginny here comes up with a plan to make Ron desperate to get himself into the New Year's Ball," Fred said proudly, patting his little sister on the back. Ginny gave a shy smile to Harry, who was curious to hear more. "Anyways, she pulled off this perfect act about how Ron's favourite Quidditch star would be there, so now he's going to make a fool of himself trying to get a date... in less than forty hours."

"And if, by some miracle, he does find a girl desperate enough to go with him, he'll be wearing our great-uncle's dress robes," George laughed.

"What's wrong with his robes?" Harry asked.

"Well, apart from being about a century out of date, they're about ten times as ugly as the stuff Dumbledore wears," Ginny finally spoke up again.

Harry chuckled. "You know, you guys didn't have to do this for us. We're fine just letting him be."

"Oh no, Harry, this isn't for you. If a Weasley acts out of line, we normally get an earful from our mother. Since he hasn't got the stones to tell mum what he did, we've taken it upon ourselves to give him what he deserves. Consider it an internal family matter. You two just have fun on New Year's Eve."

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- When's the last time any of you had to deal with a roll of film? Man, I almost accidentally wrote the Grangers taking pictures with a digital camera.

- I thought I'd get to the beginning of the Ball by this chapter, but then I realized there were quite a few loose ends I opened up a few chapters ago that I forgot to deal with, including Malfoy.

- hoping Malfoy will actually be expelled, or Snape fired, would be entirely too optimistic.

Chapter 22: Two Left Feet

Harry waited at in the common room, watching the stairs to the girls' dorms. He fiddled with his bow tie, undoing and re-tying it over and over as he waited anxiously. Beside him stood several other Gryffindor boys. Most of them were simply getting bored of waiting for the girls. He saw some green fabric appear at the top of the steps. Slowly making her way down was Ginny Weasley. Dean got up and said, "Well, there's my date. See you all downstairs."

A few minutes later, Lavender appeared in a dress of that colour. In Harry's opinion, it was somewhat garish, covered in sequins and far too shiny. The skirt was multi-layered and poofy, much like a fairy-tale princess's. Lavender herself had the reddest lipstick Harry had ever seen, along with bright blue mascara. She giggled as she passed Harry, "You're in for a surprise tonight, Potter!" She linked arms with Cormac McLaggen as they left the tower. Harry continued to wait.

Just after the Fat Lady closed the entrance after Lavender, he saw a slim dress of shocking pink appear at the top of the stairs. Parvati was making her way down in a dress that was styled after an Indian sari. "You're going to love what we've done with Hermione," she said as she passed by. Harry noticed that, although she hadn't been as excessive as Lavender with her makeup, she did concentrate on her eyes with hers. She had decorated her eyes with both black and gold eyeliner to the point where they looked like those of a nyx. She left Gryffindor tower alone, presumably to meet up with her date. Apparently her sister had set her up with some fifth-year boy in Ravenclaw.

What did she mean by what they did with Hermione? thought Harry. The way those two operate, Hermione might be coming down with a clown face for all I know. He worried more and more every minute. Staring at the clock on the wall, they had another five minutes until the ball began. The only people left in the common room aside from Harry were the ones who weren't interested in going to the ball anyways. Where was Hermione? Harry fretted.

With three minutes to go, Hermione quickly rushed down the stairs. She had her hair done up far more elegantly than back at home, in a tight bun that was presumably held together by magic, because Harry couldn't figure out how it could stay that way. She left the ends

of her hair deliberately loose around the bun, so it had a little playful messiness to it. It was a far cry from Hermione's old, too-much-hair-to-manage messiness. Thankfully, she kept her makeup to a minimum- just some eyeliner and lip gloss, along with some dark nail polish. With her dress and jewellery, Harry was awestruck. He scolded himself for never imagining that Hermione could be this beautiful.

"Ugh! I'm going to kill Lavender and Parvati!" Hermione huffed in the most unladylike manner. "Come on, Harry, we're going to be late!" She grabbed Harry in his dazed state, nearly causing him to fall over.

"What did they do? Are they the reason why you're late?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Hermione hissed. "They wouldn't stop trying to dress me up like a doll and giving advice on how to catch boys like fish at the ball. As if I needed anyone's attention other than yours! I ended up having to wash off everything they did and redoing everything myself."

"So you managed all this in only ten minutes after Parvati left?" Harry was impressed.

"Yes! And this is why I ended up with such a... bland look. I'm sorry, Harry, I really wanted this to be special..."

"Don't worry, Hermione. You're looking even better than I could have imagined."

As they were scurrying down the many flights of stairs, they heard a hooting from above. Kerris, being led by Hedwig, were flying through the castle and landed gently on the banisters beside Harry and Hermione. Kerris proudly stuck out her leg, bearing a small note, a wrist-band corsage for Hermione and a matching boutonniere for Harry. They were freshly made from the Flumpet that Dan had bought during Harry's shopping trip. Thanking their owls, they continued down, reading the note along the way.

Dear Hermione and Harry

I hope the flowers reach you in time for the ball. Dan nearly forgot about it and we had them done this afternoon. I just hope Kerris

didn't tire herself out rushing all the way out to Scotland for you. We got the pictures developed and we'll send copies along next time. I hope you can find someone to take pictures for you as well. We'd love to have photos of you dancing your hearts out.

Love,

Emma and Dan

Hermione slipped hers on her wrist as Harry affixed his to his lapel. Grinning, they knew they were finally ready- with one minute on the clock and the doors of the Great Hall in sight. Everyone was milling about, waiting for the doors to open. Harry had never seen such a sea of colours among the students- usually it was just a lot of black with bits of red, green, blue, and gold. Now, on the girls at least, were dresses of every colour and fabric. Some of the Durmstrang girls had even taken to wearing fur, while most of the French girls tended to choose more daring sheerer fabrics with generous amounts of skin showing. Most of the Hogwarts students had taken to wearing more traditional dresses that nearly reached the floor and made with layers of heavier fabrics. There was the occasional girl who tried something a little more unique, like Parvati. The boys all wore black dress robes- except for two, who stuck out like a sore thumb. Harry laughed as he pointed them out to Hermione. "I hope Angelina and Katie aren't too miffed about their dates' fashion sense."

Off to the side, Harry could notice a cordoned-off area with nearly a hundred journalists and photographers packed like sardines, trying to get as close as they can to the crowds. The champions were happy to be able to keep their distance, while some other students gladly walked towards them, letting the photographers snap their pictures. "I forgot the map!" Harry suddenly said aloud.

"Why do we need it now?" Hermione asked.

"I wanted to find Rita Skeeter, so I could at least know what she looks like," Harry explained.

"Forget about her tonight, Harry. Let's just have fun," Hermione said. "I'll keep an eye out for her during the Trial of Water."

They approached the other champions, who were allowed their own area opposite to the press. Interestingly enough, there were only three couples. "Hello Fleur," Harry greeted the witch. "I see you managed to snag Cedric."

"Hey yourself, Harry," Cedric said in reply. "It's not as if she had to try very hard. Who could possibly resist a beautiful, intelligent, talented, half-Veela girl like her?"

"Harry could," Fleur laughed.

"Because I've got Hermione," Harry explained.

"Did you know that, out of the one hundred and sixty-eight Triwizard Tournaments ever held, only six times have two of the champions chosen each other for the Yule ball? You two will be the center of attention this evening," Hermione told them.

"Zat is not a problem for me," Fleur said as she pulled off some kind of wandless Veela magic, making her skin sparkle.

"You know, if you keep doing that, I might end up falling over you this evening. I can only resist you so much, Fleur," Cedric said.

Krum had stayed silent the entire time. Interestingly enough, he had chosen a Beauxbaton girl for a date- Harry didn't recognize her, as she wasn't one of the girls with Fleur he had met on his trip to Hogsmeade after the duels. She was far shorter than Krum, the top of her head only reaching Krum's shoulder. It seemed that the gruff, burly Durmstrang champion liked quiet, dainty girls. All of the Durmstrang women were clearly as tough as the men. Oddly enough, that made Harry and Hermione the only couple out of the three where both were from the same school. All six of them made small talk for another few minutes after the doors to the Great Hall opened and all the other students made their way inside.

"We're supposed to go in last- and open up with a dance right away, even before the speeches and announcements," Cedric explained. "You got here just after Bagman told us."

"Yes, one event where we can do something before the old men talk," Krum muttered.

Harry, in all the rush to get to the ball on time, was suddenly reluctant to enter. He whispered to Hermione, "I think we forgot something on our to-do list."

"You mean dancing lessons? Harry, this is going to be a disaster!" Hermione was panicking. She wasn't used to being so unprepared for anything.

"Calm down... um... just be careful where you step, we'll just do... something."

"Easy for you to say! You're not wearing high heels with open toes! I've barely gotten used to walking in these shoes, never mind dancing!"

They kept bickering under their breaths as they followed the other champions into the Great Hall, whereupon they both stiffened up immediately. They both put on nervous smiles as they glanced around, seeing applauding students surrounding them. Up ahead, Fleur had once again put on her "publicity" persona and was strutting confidently to the dance floor with Cedric in tow. Krum held himself in a serious, dignified manner behind them. "So, would you rather act like Fleur and Cedric, or Krum and Dominique?" Harry whispered.

"Neither, I'd rather we just do our own thing," Hermione said.

"So let's," Harry said as he linked arms with his date. "I'm just happy that I get to... try to dance with you tonight. We should just ignore everyone else and enjoy our night together, shouldn't we?"

"Splendid idea, Mr. Potter," Hermione giggled, taking her eyes away from the crowd to smile at Harry. They both calmed down a little as they approached the dance floor. He glanced over his shoulder. Fleur and Cedric were standing together. His right hand was on her upper back, and his left hand held up her right out to the side. Fleur's left hand was resting on Cedric's shoulder. Harry and Hermione quickly copied them. The opening dance music was performed by the Hogwarts Music Club. They chose a smooth song ideal for a Foxtrot, although Harry and Hermione didn't know that. Fleur and Cedric immediately began an elegant but energetic dance, matching the beat perfectly as they glided across the dance floor. Krum and his date settled for a more subdued dance and moved

around less vigorously. Harry and Hermione took a good minute figuring out whether they wanted to go left or right.

"You know, if we've really done this several times over, I had hoped some of this might come to me naturally," Harry said.

"Well, if we danced horribly every single time, then dancing horribly would definitely come naturally to us," Hermione said glumly. "Ow! Harry, aren't you listening to the music?" she cried out as Harry accidentally stepped on her toes.

"Sorry, Hermione!" Harry winced. They both slowed down and settled for swaying back and forth on the spot. "How do they do that?" He wondered aloud as Fleur and Cedric passed by them. "It's like they can read each other's minds!"

"That's it! Harry, just concentrate on what you're going to do, but put it outside of your occlumency shields."

Harry could see what Hermione was about to attempt. He concentrated on taking short side-steps to the left, and felt Hermione perform some light legilimency on him. As he stepped, Hermione went in the opposite direction at the exact same time.

"Whoops! I forgot I have to do the opposite of what you're doing," Hermione said sheepishly. "Let's try that again."

This time, Harry took a few steps to the right and Hermione followed perfectly. Feeling a little more confident, he began changing direction, going left and right, and she matched his every step. "I think this is working. You're brilliant, Hermione!"

"Follow the beat! You're ignoring the music right now!" Hermione was clearly excited that they might actually be able to pull it off. Harry sped up a little to match the music as they could now move in all four directions. When Harry caught a glimpse of some of the more complicated moves that Fleur and Cedric were pulling off, though, Hermione stumbled a bit. "Harry! I can't do that!"

"What? I'm sorry, I was thinking about too much." Harry concentrated on Hermione and their simple little dance, moving in a boxy pattern in the four cardinal directions. Towards the end, they managed to perform a few simple turns so that they weren't always

facing the same way, but the song ended before they could get used to it.

"Well, one minute of actual dancing out of seven isn't too bad," Harry laughed.

"It is if you're the one with your toes exposed," grumbled Hermione. "But I wouldn't mind dancing again after a bit of rest."

As they walked off the dance floor, Neville and Luna greeted them. "I'm so glad you two got to dance together this time! And you're both wearing Flumpet Cupflowers! That's such a good idea. You don't want to get a nargle infection during the middle of a dance. After all, what would happen if they stole your rhythm from you?" Luna exclaimed.

"Hello, Luna... what do you mean, 'this time?'" Harry asked.

"I'm not sure, but the Blibbering Humdingers told me it was much better than your first dance with the pink and brown one. Do you think they mean Parvati?" Luna asked.

"Uhh, I'm not sure if I ever danced with her," Harry said. If he had, it was a completely forgettable experience. Leaning in to Luna, he whispered, "Luna... do you remember what happens when I win the Triwizard cup?"

Luna looked at him the way that others often looked at her. "I can't remember what hasn't happened yet, Harry. You're weird." The irony of Luna calling him weird was not lost on him. Hermione decided it was better to change the subject.

"So, Luna, you know about this plant? I couldn't figure out what it was. Does it really protect against nargles?" Hermione turned to their resident botanist with a grin.

"I don't remember seeing that kind of flower in any of my books," Neville said. "Have you got the plant itself? I'd love to take a look and maybe grow one of my own."

"It's at home," Hermione said. "My dad bought it with Harry at some odd florist in Unifer's Alley."

"Oh... maybe this summer, then? Anyways, have you got any advice on how to dance? You two seemed to learn really quickly."

Hermione grinned. "Well, I was reading Harry's mind with legilimency while he just concentrated on what steps he was about to take." Looking back and forth at Luna and Neville, she added, "I think it's best if Luna does the reading."

"Oh, I was so ready to let Neville inside of me, too," Luna pouted. Neville nearly spilled his drink.

Harry and Hermione took their seats at the champions' table, ready to begin their dinner. The rest of the guests made their way to their tables, eager to see the party under way. The guests were to another round of speeches by the headmaster for each school as well as Bartemius Crouch. Harry eyed the man carefully, the first time he'd seen him since the unveiling of the Goblet of Fire several months ago. Harry was itching to talk to the man, but decided to save it for later in the night. There was no point in ruining the night for everyone else if things did go sour. Hermione was keeping her eye on Cornelius Fudge. Both of them distrusted him strongly and were sure he had quite an important role to play in the future.

As the food arrived, Harry was about to dig in greedily when Hermione nudged him with her knee. "What?" he asked.

"Wrong fork," Hermione said. "Start with the salad fork."

"Huh?"

"The one on the left!" she whispered. Harry put down the one he was holding and exchanged it for the smaller fork before he began on his salad appetizer.

"You know, all these rules about fine dining really take the joy out of eating such delicious food," Harry jokingly complained.

"Don't tell me you're going to gorge yourself like Ron," Hermione huffed, straightening up. "Anyways, how often do we get to do this, anyways?"

"Maybe once every time we go back through the beacon?" he whispered into her ear.

Hermione giggled. "I expect to be taken to a nice dinner and dance more often than that, Harry."

"I'll remember that," he replied.

The dinner was a light three-course meal, which let everyone finish quickly without feeling too stuffed to dance afterwards. Afterwards, food and drink was available for those who wanted to keep eating, but the tables were mostly cleared for those who simply wanted to mingle and converse. The Hogwarts Music Club had left the stage while the guests were eating, making way for the guest band of the night, the Weird Sisters. Harry and Hermione both noticed that, while they used classical orchestral instruments like cellos, violins, and piano, the music they played was far more upbeat and better for the younger guests, making the ball more like a rock concert. With the smaller group playing the music, Harry finally noticed how the magical instruments filled the entire hall evenly with sound without being too loud for anyone, even those sitting directly in front of the stage. Seeing that nearly everyone was distracted with dancing, food, or conversation, he decided that it would be the perfect time to try a private chat with Mr. Crouch.

"Excuse me, Mr. Crouch, could I have a word?" Harry asked when he approached the officials' table. He began with some very light legilimency, just in case Crouch had enough occlumency training to detect him.

"Why, if it isn't Harry Potter. I'd be glad to have a chat with you. What do you want to know?"

"Has there been any progress in finding out who may have put my name into the cup?" Harry started with a relatively innocuous question.

"I'm sorry, I haven't heard anything new. The investigation isn't my department's concern, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you should speak to Auror Shackbolt instead." That wasn't a lie, Harry could feel. He could sense that Crouch had some basic mental shields but wasn't actively concentrating on them now. Not wanting to put the man on his guard, Harry kept his legilimency at the lowest levels.

"I was hoping you might have heard something they didn't. They did say the suspect was probably a master enchanter. Do you know anyone who is one?"

"No," was Crouch's reply. That was a lie. Damn, couldn't he say more than that? How can I keep questioning him without sounding accusing?

"Really? I thought a man of your position may have met a few..." Harry said in a disappointed tone. He did his best trying to play the guilt card, but it seemed like Crouch was immune to it.

"Mr. Potter, the person who subverted the Goblet of Fire is a criminal. Before I became the head of the International Cooperation, I spent decades putting criminals into Azkaban. If I knew any enchanters who operated legally, they'd be rotting in a cell by now." Crouch's bold statements were rather odd to Harry. They were more than just truthful statements, he could feel that Crouch firmly believed in catching and punishing the criminals- but why did the last sentence feel completely different?

"Could any of them have escaped?"

"Nobody can escape Azkaban... oh, right, Sirius Black," Crouch corrected himself. "I can assure you, Mr. Potter, that Black was no enchanter. He was little more than a loose cannon. Good with his wand, but too undisciplined to ever try learning something that took as much time and patience as enchanting." Harry was getting frustrated. The first sentence was a lie- even before Crouch made the excuse of Sirius. He was covering something up, but what was it? Harry was almost tempted to just let loose and tear his way through Crouch's mind to find his answers, but with Aurors and the Minister of Magic himself present, that would be worse than foolish.

While trying to think of his next question, he was distracted by roars of laughter behind him. He spun around to see Ron Weasley at the door, with one of the first-year Gryffindor girls, who was wearing her standard school robes. She obviously hadn't planned on coming to the ball. He was wearing one of the ugliest robes Harry had ever seen. He didn't think it was possible to have the colours clash that badly- the tailor must have been colourblind or else had done it deliberately. It was striped purple and red- mostly. The collar and cuffs were lined with frilly green lace, and the buttons were a shiny,

bright blue. It was topped off with an orange cravat. Ron was wearing proper black shoes, but with the suit, he may as well have worn red slippers and it wouldn't have made it any worse. The sight of it made Harry lose track of what he was going to say to Crouch next.

Ron looked immediately to the officials' and VIP table, searching for his idol amongst the dinner guests. He made a beeline for Harry when he couldn't see the Chudley Cannons star, leaving his "date" standing at the entrance of the Great Hall. "Harry! Have you seen Tavin Macalister tonight? I heard he was supposed to be here!"

"What? Why would he be here? This is a Triwizard event, not some kind of Quidditch party, you know."

"Shows how much you know, eh?" Ron said smugly. "How's it feel to be left out of the loop, Harry? Don't worry, I forgive you. I'll get you an autograph too once I find him." He found his next target, Krum, thinking that would lead him to his prize.

Fred, George, and Ginny hauled Harry away from Crouch, laughing like mad. "I can't believe he actually went through with it!" Fred said, wiping a tear from his face.

"That girl over there is probably the bravest firstie I've ever seen. She does Gryffindor proud," George said.

"That doesn't stop her from being scared to death with none of her friends around. That poor girl! And she has nobody to dance with!" Hermione said as she approached them.

"I'll keep her company," Ginny said. "It seems Dean is more interested in the food than in me." Harry looked around for his roommate, and spotted him chatting with some other Gryffindors, still snacking on food at the table. He didn't seem all that concerned about Ginny.

"So any bets on how long it'll take Ronnie to figure it out?" Fred asked as he watched Ron approach Krum with a parchment and quill in hand. He appeared to be interrupting a private moment between Dominique and Krum, who seemed to be hitting it off.

"Oi! That little French one's feisty!" George exclaimed as the parchment went up in flames. Krum's date followed up by dousing the flames with her drink, leaving Ron sopping wet. Even Krum seemed to be surprised by her outburst.

"I wonder if he'll still fawn over Vicky Krum after that," Fred laughed.

"Will you two stop laughing at your brother and give us a little attention?" Angelina had crept up behind them, giving Fred a hard pinch on his neck. Katie was right behind her, equally annoyed. The two girls dragged the twins off into the crowd.

Finally alone, Hermione pulled Harry to a quieter corner of the hall, asking him, "Did you find out anything about Crouch?"

"He's not the one who put my name in, but he's hiding something. I couldn't figure out any more without accusing him of casting the Imperius on Moody in front of everyone."

"What do you mean, he's hiding something?"

"I think he knows who it is, but he doesn't want to admit it? I think it has to be an escaped convict. I got the most conflicted feelings from him when I asked about criminals who were enchanters."

"But Sirius is the only one who's ever escaped from Azkaban," Hermione said, puzzled. "I mean, if anyone else did then it would be all over the papers again."

"What else can I do? He's had occlumency training. If I pushed any harder he'd probably throw me in Azkaban himself," Harry sighed. "Oh, I forgot to mention, he used to be an auror or something. He said something about catching criminals himself. Did you know that?"

"So maybe he was lying about a criminal he caught himself?" Hermione sighed. "We can't get at the court records from school. This might have to wait until summer, when we can visit the Ministry ourselves."

"Put that on our to-do list, then," Harry said. "Let's just enjoy the rest of the evening. You up for another dance?"

"Actually, I'm thinking pictures first," Hermione said, pointing to Colin Creevy, who was apparently talking to the first-year girl Ron had brought with him. Ginny was looking rather pleased with herself.

"How did Colin get in here? He's only third year! And I don't mean this badly, but he's not exactly brave enough to ask an older girl out to the ball with him, I think."

"I think he may have special permission from Professor McGonagall to be the official student photographer," Hermione said. "He is one of the only students with his own camera, after all."

As Colin saw Harry approach, he stopped talking and nervously stuttered, "I-I haven't been t-taking any pictures of you this evening, Harry, Hermione! I s-swear!"

"Relax, Colin. We want you to take our pictures this time," Harry explained. "In fact, I'll even pay you for it."

"Really?" Colin took his camera out of his bag, eager to snap a few right away.

"With certain conditions," Hermione added quickly before he pressed the shutter. "You don't give or sell these pictures to anyone. In fact, we want all the copies. And we'll want duplicates of the ones we like best."

Colin nodded in understanding. Harry and Hermione posed for several pictures, trying different positions. They started off with relatively normal, side-by-side picture, then some with Harry holding Hermione from behind. Grabbing a chair, they tried a few shots sitting. Eventually they began to have some more fun like they did at home, although they were still stuck in the Great Hall. They had a shot of themselves dancing, pretending they were better than they actually were. There was a mock utensil fight at their table, which led to a few shots of Hermione feeding Harry. They ended their photo session with their arms wrapped around each other, their lips locked in a soft kiss. They could hear a few wolf-whistles in the background, but they ignored them.

"Okay, that picture doesn't get to mum and dad, alright?"

"Agreed. But I think I'll keep it with me all the time," Harry said. "Maybe I should put it in a locket to keep it close by."

"I want one too!" Hermione squeaked.

"Of course you'll get one! Maybe it should be one of those lockets that snap together like a puzzle. A heart-shaped puzzle or something."

"Ugh, no! I can't imagine myself wearing that after I graduate from school. Pick one that's classier, please!"

"Fine, fine," Harry said as his idea was partially shot down. "Let's go dance now."

They made their way back to the dance floor, where there were really only a few couples dancing. The Weird Sisters were playing a quick, upbeat song, and very few people could truly dance to it, most of them opting to just move around in place. Fleur and Cedric, however, had stolen the dance floor as they jiving perfectly to the music, causing many people to stop and watch. Harry was glad that everyone's attention was on them, which allowed him to learn how to dance properly with Hermione without cheating with legilimency. The only other couple who was really dancing was, surprisingly enough, Luna and Neville. At least, Luna was dancing. Neville was getting the hang of moving his feet, and Luna was very good at avoiding his. Every once in a while when Neville froze, unsure of what to do, Luna would just continue and add a flourish, like a spin or even jump into Neville's arms until he recovered from the shock and continued dancing.

The two of them decided to settle on a very simple dance like they had just did at the beginning of the ball. Going at half the speed of the music, they just danced in a simple square, using the same steps as before but without any legilimency tricks. Both of them were surprised how much easier it was this time.

"You know, this is pretty fun," Harry said. "Maybe we should have taken those lessons after all."

"Especially when you've gotten much better with your footwork," Hermione sniggered. "I'm just wondering how long it took Cedric to learn how to dance like that."

"We could ask," Harry said.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to interrupt them. We can always ask him some other day."

Fleur and Cedric tired each other out after a while, spending the rest of the night at their table chatting. Harry and Hermione continued to dance their slow, simple dance until 11:50, when the floor was cleared and they readied the countdown to the new year. Sitting down at the table, Harry watched as sparkling numbers appeared on the ceiling of the Great Hall, displaying the time. They looked like clusters of stars, blending in with image of the actual night sky outside that the ceiling showed.

"We don't have any drinks to cheers with!" Hermione suddenly realized. She got up from the table to grab two champagne flutes, which were filled with non-alcoholic Sparkling Squash Cider instead.

"Ten!" The crowd cheered as the final countdown began.

"Nine!"

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said as she returned with the glasses just in time.

"Three!"

"Two!" They raised their glasses.

"One!"

"Happy New Year!" Everyone shouted as the hall filled with cheers and clinking glasses.

"Happy New Year," Harry said as he took a swig of the cider. Seconds later, his eyes rolled up as he crumpled to the floor.

Author's Chapter End Notes:

- Ballroom dancing actually is kind of fun. I suggest you try it. I wish I had the time to take more lessons.

- Yay, finally gearing up for a little more action again soon. Hopefully.
- Yes, Ginny at the moment is still "fangirl Ginny" having not received Hermione's summer talk. I'm still trying to figure out how much of a fangirl she is, though. Canon Ginny barely gets any mention, so it's hard to tell where she should be.

Chp23